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Wilton Education Foundation unveils new Starlab planetarium

By Jeff Yates



Kevin Meehan, science instructional leader at Cider Mill School, demonstrates the various lessons which can be taught with the Starlab. —Scott Mullin photos

It's not often that parents get a chance to see the world through their children's eyes, but on Saturday night, for just a few hours, many in the Wilton community did just that.

At the Wilton Education Foundation's "An Evening of Stars," a first-ever thank you to foundation supporters and school staff, a large crowd gathered at the home of Jennifer and Duncan Toll on Dudley Road for the unveiling of the new Starlab inflatable planetarium. Casting aside their shoes, and crawling through the tunnel into the planetarium, the party-goers were greeted by Kevin Meehan, Cider Mill School's science instructional leader, who presided over a show-and-tell of sorts.



David Carmichael emerges from the Starlab following a presentation on Columbus' voyage to the new world.

Tucked into the 11-foot dome, sitting cross-legged on the floor, the groups of adults cycling through pointed to the ceiling, whispered and giggled, sounding and acting much like a class of schoolchildren. Mr. Meehan said he hopes to get much the same response from his students, and believes the Starlab will bring that excitement to the classroom.

“The middle school teachers are besides themselves,” said Mr. Meehan, who had requested and received the needed \$25,000 funding for the Starlab through a Wilton Education Foundation grant.

While the name —Starlab — may conjure up visions of a traditional planetarium replicating the night sky, Mr. Meehan said the unit covered a much broader range of topics, and could be used across all of Wilton’s schools and grades for education.

“You could teach length of day and height of the sun. You can teach seasons with this. Seasons is the hardest thing to teach,” he said. Projecting larger-than-life images, teachers can literally walk their students through the parts of the biological cell. “There’s tectonic plates and there’s celestial navigation. Really complex stuff,” he said.



Peter Keating, owner of the Village Market, pictured with his wife, Cynthia, was honored with the Wilton Education Foundation's first ever Golden Star award.

On Saturday night, Mr. Meehan used the planetarium to teach a lesson on Christopher Columbus’ journey to America. Projecting an image of the globe onto the rounded roof of the Starlab, Mr. Meehan used a laser pointer to show the traditional trading routes to India. Then he delved into Columbus’ complex voyage, explaining the dangers facing a ship at sea with archaic navigation, the power of the thermal ocean currents pushing against the ships’ bows and the knowledge of ocean travel at that time.

Mr. Meehan showed how Columbus traveled far south, carried by thermal currents, and explained why this southern dip was, in fact, the reason the men on the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria nearly started a mutiny. It wasn’t the length of the journey, or the vast ocean around them, but rather the fact that as they approached the equator, the North Star began dropping closer and closer to the horizon, he said. Because sailors at the time navigated by the North Star, which remains in a fixed position, watching it dip lower each night, afraid it would go out of sight, they were ready to revolt against their captain. But then the ocean currents carried the ships northward, the North Star rose higher in the sky each night, the men’s fears were allayed and Columbus eventually reached America, said Mr. Meehan.

“Thank you. Thank you. Did I say thank you,” said Mr. Meehan in formal comments

to the group later that night. “In one swoop we have taken our science program and made it extraordinary. We want you to know that teachers love teaching in Wilton. Your support in making this happen is just one example of why we love to teach here.”

Thomas Mann, chairman of WEF, said the group last year had redefined its goals to increase fund raising and bring more programs like the Starlab to the schools.

“Today, 20 months later, we’ve made incredible progress thanks to the people we have on the board,” he said. “You’ll find we have a new direction, a new focus.”

He said that night’s community appreciation event would be the first of many such annual events, and thanked Mimi Houska, Debby Rowland and Colette Poirier for their work as co-chairs in organizing the event with the help of the Toll family. Nan Merolla, vice chair of WEF, created all of the displays for the gathering, he said.

Also tied with the new annual event, Mr. Mann presented the first ever Golden Star award to Peter Keating, owner of the Village Market.

The award, he said, “is for those who support the excellence in the Wilton schools and community,” and Mr. Keating was the first choice.

“One of the longest standing programs of the foundation is the Read Aloud program, and one of the longest standing supporters is Peter Keating,” he said. “Peter has been providing books for Read Aloud Day for so long,” and has donated more than 1,500 books to the program.

In addition to his donation of books, Mr. Mann said “Peter has always been one of our 150 readers at Read Aloud Day.”

Mr. Keating said supporting the foundation and the Wilton schools was a given for him, as he is also a Wilton High School graduate.

“The Wilton Education Foundation has been one of our favorite causes and Read Aloud Day is as fun as a cause can get.”

Information: wiltoneducationfoundation.org