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Hardin Planetarium fundraising amid cuts

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Richard Gelderman, professor of physics and astronomy at Western Kentucky University demonstrates Thursday, August 10, 2017, what will happen during a solar eclipse at Hardin Planetarium. Gelderman is also the director of the planetarium and strongly advises not looking at the sun without proper equipment. (Bac Totrong/photo@bgdailynews.com)

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In October 1967, the Hardin Planetarium was state of the art.

Today, it is not, according to Richard Gelderman, director of the planetarium and professor of astronomy and physics at Western Kentucky University. That's why he's initiating a journey toward a fundraising goal of \$150,000 this weekend with a benefit event for the planetarium.

"We've never asked for (donations) before, but the times have changed," Gelderman said. "It's been one budget cut after another budget cut after another budget cut."

On Saturday, the planetarium will host mentalist Lewis D. Chaney for a "sleight of mind" performance from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.

It might seem odd to host a mentalist in a science space, but Gelderman said the illusionary practice is science-based.

"We're bringing in somebody that will announce right away to the audience that 'I can't read minds,' " Gelderman said. "And then, he's going to do things that almost everyone is going to say 'I have no idea how he did that!'"

"He's really excited about doing a show in the planetarium because of the uniqueness of the space. He's created this show especially for this."

Beginning at 7 p.m. and continuing immediately after the show, Purple Toad Winery is sponsoring a reception with wine and cheese provided by Hilltopper Creamery.

Tickets are free and available at [Eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com). There were four tickets left as of Friday morning.

After the show, attendees will have the option to donate to the planetarium.

Gelderman doesn't expect to raise \$150,000 in a single night. But he does seem enthusiastic about the prospects of slowly transforming the planetarium back into a "forefront leader for communication, space, stars, the universe."

That will require serious renovations. The planetarium still largely resembles its original construction.

"The planetarium really needs some help," he said.

But the payoff is educating current and future generations about basic science.

Humans climbing out of the caves probably asked where the stars came from, why did the sun move and why do seasons keep repeating.

"This is the oldest set of questions that humanity has ever had," Gelderman said.

Gelderman believes everyone is naturally curious about the world, and that they need a place to ask those questions and get some answers.

"Our mission is to introduce to our community the wonders of the stars and the universe," Gelderman said. "We're just addressing that natural curiosity."



The planetarium is open from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Mondays; from 6 to 8 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays; from 8:30 a.m. to noon Wednesday and Fridays; and from 1 to 3 p.m. Sundays.

There are free shows year-round at 7 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays and at 2 p.m. Sundays. Currently, the offering is an audience-controlled production called "Lives of the Stars" that will run through the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. Audience members pick out a star, and they hear about that star's story.

The planetarium also houses rotating, interactive exhibits on astronomy and space science in a space available to book for private events.

With the budget cuts, the planetarium staff have been unable to implement their planned two new exhibits this year.

Gelderman hopes to turn that around soon.

Those who are unable to attend the benefit but are interested in donating to the planetarium may contribute online at <http://alumni.wku.edu/physicsastronomy>.

Those interested in donating can contact the planetarium about adding a name to a star chamber for eternal life among the stars.

– *Hardin Planetarium staff may be reached at 270-745-4044 or at hardin.planetarium@wku.edu.*

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