

Asteroids Land on Ithaca's Planet Walk

By Larry Klaes

Those familiar with the Sciencenter's Sagan Planet Walk may have noticed the newest addition to this scale model of the Solar System: the Asteroid Station just off the Ithaca Commons.

Erected next to the Tompkins Trust Company drive-through at 116 E. Seneca St. earlier this year, the Asteroid Station was dedicated on Aug. 17 at the nearby Sun Station of the Sagan Planet Walk.

A large crowd gathered to celebrate the opening of the latest member of the Sagan Planet Walk. Those present were treated to some appropriate and free refreshments: freeze-dried astronaut ice cream, Milky Way chocolate bars and Tang, which astronauts started drinking on space missions in 1965 with Project Gemini.

Charlie Trautmann, executive director of the Sciencenter, offered some brief remarks on the Asteroid Station and the rest of this monument to the late Cornell astronomer Carl Sagan, which Trautmann conceived of in 1985 as both a tribute to the longtime Ithaca resident and an enduring exhibit to his legacy of bringing the Cosmos to the public.

"The Sciencenter came up with the idea of the Asteroid Station several years ago because of the public interest in meteorites and their origin," said Trautmann. "The Asteroid Station took about two years to plan, design and build."

Trautmann thanked everyone involved in the project, including Ann Druyan, technical advisors Yervant Terzian and Jim Bell, and grant funders from Tompkins County Tourism and the NASA/New York Space Grant program at Cornell. Trautmann also cited AccuFab, which donated the materials and fabrication of the station; Incodem, which donated the laser-cutting of the steel for the monument; and Tompkins Trust Company for providing the space and landscaping for the Asteroid Station.

Randy Lovell of Tompkins Trust Company and David Sparrow of the Tompkins County Tourism program also gave brief remarks at the ceremony.

Trautmann noted that the Asteroid Station was conceived by Sciencenter trustee emeritus Bob Orrange and that Sciencenter staff and volunteers designed the monument in collaboration with AccuFab.

"The Asteroid Station needed to be reminiscent of the other monuments on the Sagan Planet Walk, but also clearly distinguishable, as asteroids are not planets," Trautmann explained. "Catherine McCarthy, Sciencenter grant projects director, coordinated the project, and the signage was designed by Emily Maletz of Emily Maletz Graphic Design."

One important similarity the Asteroid Station has with the other Sagan Planet Walk monuments is a concise combination of images and text on the countless numbers of relatively small, rocky bodies that roam our Solar System.

Most asteroids and their "offspring," the meteoroids, dwell in interplanetary space between the solar orbits of the planets Mars and Jupiter, but a fair number escape that distant region due to impacts and close passes with other celestial objects. Some of them eventually cross paths with Earth. Those natural bodies large enough to survive the plunge through our plan-

et's atmosphere and reach the ground are subsequently redesignated meteorites.

The Asteroid Station displays an actual representative meteorite located in its base. Called the Campo del Cielo (Spanish for "Field of the Sky"), this 88-pound iron meteorite is part of one of the largest collections of meteorites yet found, which impacted in the Chaco province of northern Argentina roughly 5,000 years ago. For centuries the natives of that region used the iron pieces of this meteorite to make their weapons.

The meteorite was donated by Michael Casper of Meteorites Inc., an internationally-recognized meteorite dealer who lives in Tompkins County. Visitors to the station can lay their hands on this former resident of outer space, which is estimated to be 4.5 billion years old, the age when our Solar System began to form from a great cloud of gas and dust.

"This station provides the opportunity for people to touch the oldest thing they will ever touch," Trautmann said.

Druyan, who co-authored the "Cosmos" television series and



Photo provided

This Asteroid Station has been added to the Sciencenter's Sagan Planet Walk.

companion book with her late husband Carl Sagan and is now the founder and CEO of Cosmos Studios in Ithaca, said during the ceremony that she "had the honor and privilege to make 20 trips

around the Sun with Carl. He loved Ithaca and always thought of Ithaca as an oasis of consciousness. We have an amazing community who can come together to sustain an organization like the Sciencenter, which is so welcoming to people near and far. I'm thrilled we now have an Asteroid Station on the Sagan Planet Walk and that we, like science, can keep open to new knowledge and facts."

Druyan authored the new "2009 Passport to the Solar System" guidebook that visitors to the Sciencenter can use to explore the nearly one-mile-long Sagan Planet Walk. The new guidebook contains information about asteroids, revised text regarding Pluto's new astronomical status, a new Sagan Planet Walk map and vibrant images courtesy of NASA.

Each passport costs \$4 and can be purchased at the Sciencenter and other locations in Ithaca. Visitors who complete the Sagan Planet Walk with a fully stamped passport may present it at the Sciencenter to receive one free museum admission.

For more information visit www.sciencenter.org/saganpw.

