UCI Physical Sciences hosts partial solar eclipse viewing

The event saw people from all walks witness a rare celestial event.
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Eclipse watchers at the UC Irvine School of Physical Sciences gaze on as the moon marches across the sun.

Picture Credit:
Steve Zylius / UCI

The sun shined bright on the morning of April 8, 2024, and a crowd of anteaters filled the plaza at the UC Irvine School of Physical Sciences. Excitement buzzed in

the air like it was a music festival, but it wasn't a band headlining the event. Indeed, it wasn't even something on this planet – it was the 2024 solar eclipse, which saw the moon crawl steadily across the face of the sun, dimming the sky and instilling awe.

"It speaks to the universality of the phenomena of nature," said Professor Paul Robertson of the UCI Department of Physics & Astronomy as he held up his nearly-opaque solar viewing lens and peered at the eclipse. "It's one of the most beautiful vistas that nature gives us, and it brings people together."

Robertson is the faculty advisor for the UCI Astronomy Club, which helped host the partial eclipse viewing event at Physical Sciences.

Eclipse watchers stood in long lines for a chance to peer through some of the club's telescopes, which, outfitted with special filters, stood aimed at the sun. Through the telescopes you could see the silhouette of the moon blocking the sun, and you could see dark sun spots – patches of lower-than-average temperature on the sun's surface. The School of Physical Sciences, with the help of undergraduate astronomy major and NASA Eclipse Ambassador Evelyn Castaneda, passed out solar viewing glasses to attendees.

Robertson's lab researchers how planets form, and they look to solar systems beyond our own to study planets that are just coming to be. Sometimes they can mistake a sunspot for a planet that they think is moving across a star. "I study the effects of star spots on our search for distant exoplanets," said Robertson, whose research recently featured on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. "Today, I'm excited to see if the moon covers the spots."

The Astronomy Club's vice president, undergraduate physics major Bianca Murphy, stood in awe not just at the site of the eclipse, but at the event turnout. "I'm absolutely blown away by how many people are this excited about astronomy," said Murphy, who intends to join the navy upon graduating from UCI so she can train to become a NASA astronaut. "I can't believe we all get to see this event in our lifetime."

The eclipse in Southern California was not a total eclipse – just about 50% of the sun disappeared from view. Nevertheless, you could feel a sense of awe in the air at UCI. Sandy Mitchell, an Orange County resident, drove to UCI after reading about the event in the LA Times. "I'm grateful that UCI was kind enough and generous enough

to invite the public," said Mitchell. "It's a moment to step back and appreciate nature."

Read more: Researchers find exoplanet that appears to be too big for its sun.

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