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Sunwheel tells of the coming of autumnal equinox

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Most college students rely on cell phones, watches, laptops or even wall calendars to keep track of the changing days and seasons, but one University of Massachusetts professor is inviting students and others from the local community to learn about one of humankind's oldest time-telling devices – the sunwheel.

Judith Young, a UMass astronomy professor, will hold the final of four informational viewings of the autumnal equinox at sunset today at 6 p.m. Previous gatherings were held at sunrise and sunset beginning on Tuesday.

The sunwheel may pale in comparison to the interactivity offered today by such programs as Google Calendar, but sunwheels have been a valuable resource for cultures dating back to 4,800 B.C. One of the most well-known examples is Stonehenge in England.

The University has hosted such gatherings for 12 years, and will celebrate 2009 as the International Year of Astronomy, according to the official website for the UMass Sunwheel, www.umass.edu/sunwheel.

A sunwheel is an outdoor stone circle. The standing stones line up with the locations on the horizon of the rising and setting sun at the times of the solstices and equinoxes.

For participants interested in learning about the sky, Young will discuss the significance of the equinoxes and solstices, the cause of the seasons and phases of the moon, and the story behind building the 130-foot diameter UMass Sunwheel, said a press release for the eventShe will also discuss other calendar sites around the world, including the ancient astronomical observatories at Stonehenge and Callanish in Scotland. In addition, there will be an explanation of the moon's 18.6-year cycle, also called the major lunar standstill, the release said.

"Bring your questions, your curiosity, and be prepared for cool temperatures when the sun is down," added the release.

Wearing waterproof footwear and insect repellent is also suggested. Gathering will last for about one hour, and a $3 suggested donation will help with the cost of additional stonework and future programs planned for the UMass Sunwheel. T-shirts and sweatshirts will be available for purchase. In the event of rain, the gathering will be cancelled.

The UMass Sunwheel is part of The Sunwheel Project, which involved the construction of sunwheels around the world, starting at UMass in 1997.

Gatherings will also be held for the winter solstice on Dec. 21 and 22 at sunrise, or around 7 a.m., and sunset, around 3:30 p.m.

The UMass Sunwheel is located south of Alumni Stadium, just off Rocky Hill Road. It can be reached from the center of Amherst, following Amity Street to the west. After crossing University Drive at the light, continue on Rocky Hill Rd. for about 1/4 mile, and make your first right onto Stadium Drive.

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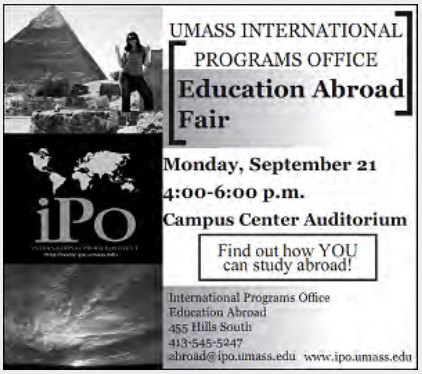

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