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Looking Up

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A love of telescopes leads physics student Derrick Rohl ’12 to the top of the world.

Story by RACHEL HATCH

For physics student Derrick Rohl ’12, there’s no substitute for the chance to peer through a telescope at a starry sky.

Rohl, who works as a teaching assistant for the Physics Department, says that Illinois Wesleyan’s Evans Observatory offers students an amazing opportunity. “We are children of the Internet,” he says. “We see images on computer screens all the time, so remote viewing via computer is not that astounding. To look through a telescope and see it for yourself is a really cool experience.”

Derrick Rohl (above) enjoys the view from the control room of one of Cerro Tololo’s mountaintop telescopes. He received a National Science Foundation research grant to fund his second trip to the Chilean observatory this January.

Rohl was on hand to help at the observatory last September when members of the campus community flocked to a viewing of Jupiter when it made its closest approach to the Earth since 1963. “People would look at the telescope and say, ‘Is this real? It’s not a picture?’”

To help encourage student and public use of the Evans telescope, Rohl and other physics students recently created a Facebook page on the Internet that includes photos and regular updates of public viewing times. “Thank heavens the sky is clear tonight! (pun intended),” read one recent update. “The observatory will be open 8-10.”

This January, Rohl's passion for astronomy will take him to La Serena, Chile, where he will spend three months conducting research at the Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory. The National Science Foundation's Research Experience for Undergraduates Program (REU) is funding Rohl's trip. Located in the Andes Mountains at an altitude of 2,200 meters, Cerro Tololo is a complex of astronomical telescopes funded by the National Science Foundation.

Rohl's research, supervised by Professor of Physics Linda French, focuses on Trojan asteroids, which revolve around the sun in the same orbit as Jupiter.

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It will be Rohl's second trip to Cerro Tololo, which is considered an ideal spot for astronomy because of its dry climate and low humidity. He visited the observatory this past summer for a seven-night observing run with Sue Lederer of NASA's Johnson Space Center to collect images of the asteroids.

"We are looking at how the asteroids rotate," explains Rohl, who took hundreds of images at one of the telescopes in Chile. "On campus, I spend time measuring the brightness of the asteroids in our images to produce light curves, which let us see how fast each asteroid is spinning."

Rohl's research with French and Lederer was presented at a research conference in California last fall.

The prospect of returning to Chile is exciting for Rohl, who plans to attend graduate school and continue with his astronomical studies after college.

"On my first night in Chile this summer, Sue and I left the control room and we stepped outside," he recalls. "I can honestly say in those unpolluted skies I saw at least one hundred stars for every one star I see in the sky at home," he said. "All I could say was 'Wow.'"