

1998 Region Award winner: Warren J. "Nick" Nichols of Richfield, WI:

Nick Nichols is a former member of the Milwaukee A. S., and a current member of the Northern Cross Science Foundation and of the Wehr A. S. He's been looking skyward ever since a child, under the dark, clear skies of northern Wisconsin. Years later, relocated in the Milwaukee area, Nick got the urge to have his own observatory after encountering difficulties getting "telescope time" at the popular M.A.S. observatory. After a two-year search, Nick and his very accommodating wife, Jeannie, settled on a rural tract of land just north of Richfield, Wisconsin. Starting on July 1st, 1984, it took Nick and many other helpers four years to get the two-story, 16 ft. diameter domed observatory completely operational and professional looking. Nick estimates the effort to have taken over 800 trips to the property, with over 3,000 hours of labor. He was also successful in getting a nearby quarry and truck stop to properly shield their lights to help preserve the night sky.

From 1988 onward, Nick has been giving free tours of the observatory to literally hundreds of people each year. Quite often people drive by the impressive looking building, turn around and pull in the driveway, wanting to know more about it all! Nick never has turned any of them away, and would never dream of charging anyone admission. Many different school groups, scout groups, and other volunteer organizations have made appointments to tour the observatory and view through his telescopes. He has also donated tours to the local PBS television station's annual auction, raising hundreds of dollars each year for them. He has hosted numerous star parties at his observatory, many in celebration of National Astronomy Day. He and Jeannie have invested many tens of hours and hundreds of dollars planning, advertising, and coordinating each annual star party months in advance. They would invite all their fellow astronomical friends to bring their equipment to help educate and entertain the public, often giving them their first glimpses through a telescope. He also set up a relative scale solar system, running the entire length of his seven-acre property, with explanatory information posted at the sun and each planet.

As word spread around year after year, hundreds of people would show up for his "open houses", even if it was cloudy! One recent year he even rented a large tent to safely display all the telescopes and equipment - sure enough, it rained (!), yet over a hundred people still showed up to see and learn all that they could. Oftentimes, Nick would hold a "worker appreciation party" later in the year for all those friends who volunteered their time and equipment. All the free food and drink you could possibly stomach was provided and prepared by Nick and Jeannie. Their generosity was, and still is, unlimited.

Nick and his observatory have appeared in many local, regional, and national newspapers and magazines. He has also written articles for local clubs' newsletters. Two of them have found their way into Amateur Astronomy. His extremely detailed account of building the observatory was printed in Northern Lights, and later in Telescope Making #36, with numerous photographs. He has also given a slide show on building his dream observatory to interested astronomy clubs. And he has contributed numerous lunar occultation timings over the years. Effectively, he is an astronomical society all unto himself!

Nick is extremely self-conscious in not wanting to talk about himself or say too much about his many accomplishments for fear of looking like a braggart in other peoples' eyes. He has helped many a beginner get their enthusiastic indoctrination into the hobby, yet is quick to give others the credit for it. His hearty laugh always makes you feel comfortable and welcome. He exudes enthusiasm when talking to other people about astronomy, and sees himself as a lifetime promoter of the hobby. There are few other amateur astronomers in our region who have accomplished so much, yet have humbly have professed to have done so little, as has Nick Nichols. He truly is a worthy recipient of the annual NCRAL achievement award.