

A Solar Viewing Report by Dawn Baird-Chleborad

No thanks to Michael Swartz I am now a ruined woman!

"Come on over!" I said, "Bring your set-up to the Telescope Workshop." I said.

Little did I know that the words I uttered would doom me for the rest of my life! The first sign of what was to come was when Michael began unloading his gear. His young son (Michael, part duex) was a willing assistant and seemed to understand much more than I the importance of what his father was unpacking. After the first couple of loads came from Michael's car I realized there was much more to come. Rousing myself from my stupor I managed to gather my wits about me and offered to assist unloading. When I got a good look at all the boxes and bundles in the center of my backyard I realized, this was to be no casual observing. This was to be a life changing event.

I was torn away from the mesmerizing sight as other workshop attendees began to show. I did, however, catch a glimpse of the awesome Coronado filter. It looked more like an essential part of a highly sophisticated defense weapon than a filter. When I returned a short while later Michael was finishing the last touches. Seeing the set-up together I began to get that old fear. You know, that fear you get as a child going into the fine china and crystal store with mom and you know there was no way you could afford to pay for something if you broke it. I understood that Michael had not been kidding when he had said that he probably kept Scope City in business single-handedly.



Cary looks through Michael Swartz's Takahashi with a Coronado solar filter.

I was hypnotized by it all, the chairs, the tables, the large umbrella, that comfortable observing chair, but most of all: that solar scope. Yet again, I was torn away but more arrivals. I returned to see my husband Cary stock-still at the eyepiece. I don't think I have ever seen him immobile that long during a workshop. I need to stress how odd this was. Cary was sitting in the blazing sun completely still. I stood in the shade and watched him, waiting for him to move. After a bit longer I began to worry. "Cary, don't get a sunburn!" I warned. He did not move. I approached. "Hey! Let other people look!" I said. Cary finally stirred from the eyepiece and suddenly he was very insistent that I look.

Now, I was exposed very fresh in my observing career to many horror stories about looking at the sun and I have already admitted to others that I am a "solar chicken", only observing images of the sun that were projected on a screen. But I have to tell you that Michael's confidence, the professionalism of his set up, the sheer sleek beauty of his scope and Cary's silent awe erased any hint of fear from my mind. Suddenly, I was eager to see what could so enchant a seasoned astronomer like my husband.

I mounted the observing chair and began to feel the sun's heat: an essential part of the experience, that created the proper sense of reality to the absolutely unreal image that caressed my eyes. I cannot tell you what I saw first, there was so much to see that at first my gaze darted about to get in everything at once. It was candy, or perhaps more like bright orange chocolate, so rich and full-bodied that my salivary glands went into over-time. My eyes devoured everything, over and over again until I finally sated the first edge of my solar hunger and I could then take the time to touch on the magnificent, clear details. Areas of light and dark, swirls and peaks, bridges of light, prominences of fire that I knew were several times the size of Earth but my mind struggled to grasp the magnitude of such a concept.

Stargazing at night, viewing stars, nebula's, planets, the moon always felt so serene and magnificent to me. Like a different Enya song playing for each night-time object. Seeing the sun at the eyepiece of Michael's scope was passionate, violent, searing like compositions of Beethoven or Richard Wagner. Instead of being calmed, I was energized. My heart beat faster and I felt as if I must turn away but could not. Time stood still for me until I began to feel faint from the heat. I know I had made a few exclamations but my brain was too otherwise occupied to remember what they were. When I broke away I looked at my profusely sweating husband and said. "We need to put on some sunscreen."

The rest of the day I was too busy to return until Michael encouraged folks to take another look before the sun was too low in the sky. I leapt up from my chair, abandoned what I was doing and hustled back out into the heat. He warned that the sight was not quite as spectacular as it had been. He was right, but it was still incredible to behold. That was when the realization hit. How could I ever look at the sun through a lesser scope? How could anything but his magnificent Takahashi and Coronado even come close to satisfying my future solar cravings.

I looked at Michael with a pained expression. "You have ruined me!" I cried. Michael, red-faced and sweating, was stunned and momentarily confused. I continued my rant. I confessed to all present that I had been planning on converting Mort (my homemade dob) for solar viewing and perhaps do some sketching as well. But I knew that those plans were for naught. How could I even approach solar viewing through my dinky, lovable scope after the magnificence of Michael's?

How dare you Michael Swartz! I am outraged!

When are you coming back?

Dawn Baird-Chleborad