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Benefactor's heart was in the stars

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Marc (Morg) Staley, right, and Alex Filippenko earlier this year. Staley, a local astronomy buff, died over the weekend. (archive photo)

By Dana Cole
Herald/Review

TOMBSTONE — Marc (Morg) Staley, known as a deep thinker with a passion for the universe, lost his battle with cancer sometime during the weekend.

In the seven years that he resided in Tombstone, Staley managed to touch hundreds of lives through his interest in astronomy and willingness to share his knowledge.

Originally from Ohio, Staley visited Tombstone for the first time in 2002 and enjoyed it so much, he decided he would stay. Along with its Old West charm and historic appeal, he was impressed by the area's dark night skies, a huge draw for stargazers. Staley found a house with a two-story deck and a spectacular view of the Dragoon Mountains, which made a perfect starting point for a home observatory.

"Tombstone has great night skies and very little light pollution, which is what astronomers want," Staley said during an interview in March. "Light pollution is the bane of everyone who looks at the sky."

After moving into his house in 2003, he used his retirement time to pursue a lifelong interest in astronomy. He bought a 12-inch telescope that he named "River" and created an open-air, dark-sky observatory on the deck of his new home. Staley also set up tombstonesky.com.

It was this passion for the universe that led Staley to Alex Filippenko, a well-known astrophysicist, researcher and professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

The two established an Internet-based friendship in which they exchanged thoughts and information about the universe.

"Marc sent me some interesting questions about astronomy, which I was happy to answer," recalls Filippenko. "Our friendship gradually developed over the Internet, and eventually I asked Marc if he would be willing to provide recommendations regarding inexpensive telescopes to people who requested such information from me." When Staley agreed, Filippenko started referring questions about backyard telescopes and night sky viewing to his friend.

In March, Filippenko traveled to Tombstone to meet Staley face-to-face for the first time and thank him personally for a \$45,000 donation he made to Berkeley's astronomy program. The money would support one of the school's graduate students working on a doctorate in astronomy.

Staley, who was 66 at the time of Filippenko's visit, was in the end-of-life stage of cancer.

"There were so many things that I wanted to do with astronomy, but just won't have the opportunity," Staley said. "By supporting this student, I feel like whatever he does, I am a part of it."

Berkeley isn't the only educational institution benefiting from Staley's generosity. In his will, Staley left his estate to Oberlin College, located in Ohio. River was shipped months ago to the college.

Kristine Hanson-Deller, a Valor Hospice patient advocate, had been working with Staley since December. "He was so courageous throughout his illness," she said. "He has no surviving family or heirs, and handled every detail of his end-of-life plans right down to the final words he wants read as his ashes are scattered."

When Filippenko noticed Staley failed to log off his computer Friday evening, he was concerned. After sending e-mails inquiring about Staley's situation, he received the confirmation Staley had died.

"He once told me that his life would have been more complete, had he been given the opportunity to describe the wonders of the universe to a classroom of primary-school children," Filippenko lamented.

"The world needs more people like Marc. I will really miss him."

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102 Fab Ave
Sierra Vista, AZ. 85635
520-458-9440

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