



Phila students head to Calif. astronomy conference

By **Jon Baker**

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NEW PHILADELPHIA — Four students from New Philadelphia High School and their teacher will be attending the meeting of the American Astronomical Society to detail their part in a project to identify previously unknown stars.

Journeying to Long Beach, Calif., for the session — which runs Sunday through Jan. 11 — are Casey Miller, a sophomore; Heath Scherick, a junior; Brandon Free, a senior; and Taylor Willis, a senior.

Accompanying them is Debbie French, a physics and engineering teacher at the high school.

More than 600 professional astronomers also will be in attendance.

French said that her students will be busy the entire time because of the large number of programs being offered, including at least one by a Nobel laureate.

“It’s going to be absolutely crazy,” she said.

Among the better-known individuals scheduled to attend is Bobak Ferdowsi, flight director on the Mars Sciences

Laboratory Curiosity mission this past summer who became an Internet sensation because of his distinctive Mohawk haircut.

“He’s kind of a big deal right now,” Miller said.

The meeting will allow the students to learn about jobs in astronomy, as well as look for potential summer internships. “It’s very practical for them to go,” French said.

The trip is being paid for by a grant from the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, Calif.

French chose the four students to participate in the project last spring. They agreed for diverse reasons.

Willis, who took French’s physics class last year, hopes to go into medical research in the future. “I wanted to be involved in real research,” she said.

Miller said she always has had an interest in astronomy. “The possibility of traveling also played into it,” she said.

Last summer, French and two of the students, Miller and Free, went to CalTech to learn which astronomy project they would be working on and how to do it.

“It was just great,” Free said. “We got to do so many cool things out there.”

That included touring CalTech’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory and seeing one of the space shuttles and a copy of the Mars rover.

This fall, they began analyzing data as they looked for young stars in the Bright Rimmed Cloud 27 in the constellation Canis Major. The data came from NASA’s Wide-Field Infrared Survey Explorer, which mapped the sky in 2010. The information was released in March.

They worked along with students and teachers from several other high schools, colleges and planetariums throughout the United States.

“Our goal was to create an inventory of new young stars in the Bright Rimmed Cloud,” French said. One way they did that was by looking for excess infrared light given off by stars.

The team identified 3,827 objects that could be young stars and found 60 new stars.

“Our group is the only group in the world that knows these stars exist,” French said.

As they attempted to identify new stars, the students had to deal with a large amount of data. “There was a lot of busywork,” Scherick noted.

French said the project was much more difficult than traditional schoolwork. “There are no answers in the back of the book,” she said.

But it serves a worthwhile purpose. "We were looking at how stars form and evolve," French said. "By studying other solar systems, we learn more about our own solar system."

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New Philadelphia High School students (from left) Heath Sherich, Brandon Free, Casey Miller, Taylor Willis and their teacher, Debbie French, have been conducting research with Cal Tech and will attend an astronomy conference in California.

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