

Love was in the stars during virtual planetarium event

For anyone interested in a good love story filled with romance and drama, look no further than the stars in the skies. Just in time for Valentine's Day, Port Chester Middle School astronomy teacher Jaime Rufo presented a virtual planetarium event, "Romance Under the Stars," on Feb. 11. She shared some unique love stories as they are told among the stars, planets and constellations.

Viewers, who tuned in via Zoom or Facebook Live, were snug in their homes watching. Those who were willing to bundle up and venture out into the cold winter air would be in for a treat, Ms. Rufo said.

"Although the nights are cold in February, it can bring up the brightest stars of the year," she said. "Even with light pollution, you can see some of the big star clusters in the sky."

One such example, she said, would take place the following day, Feb. 12. At sunrise, one had an opportunity to see "a whole party of planets," including Jupiter, Saturn, Venus and Mercury, which Ms. Rufo identified in her virtual planetarium.

She also demonstrated what other celestial things one could see later in the day. Although it would be difficult to spot, the New Moon was set to appear, heralding the start of the Lunar New Year and the Year of the Ox.

This time of year is also ripe with stars and constellations that have different meanings in different cultures but share the same theme: love.

Ms. Rufo highlighted the Greek mythological story of Perseus and Andromeda. Perseus is a star constellation in the northern sky located near other constellations, including Andromeda and

Cassiopeia. As the story goes, King Cepheus felt his kingdom was being threatened. He asked an oracle how to protect his land and was told he must sacrifice his daughter, Andromeda. The king had his daughter tied to a rock alongside the ocean and called up the sea monster, Cetus, to eat the girl. It just so happened that Perseus was returning after having beheaded Medusa and saw Andromeda tied to the rock. En route to save her, he met Pegasus and rode the winged horse to rescue Andromeda. Perseus was still carrying the severed head of Medusa and used it to distract the sea monster which, upon seeing Medusa's head, immediately turned to stone. He and Andromeda then rode to safety, and lived "happily ever after," on the back of Pegasus.

"To commemorate their story, they all got put into the stars," Ms. Rufo said as she pointed out where to find their celestial likenesses in the sky. "It's one of my all-time favorite astronomy love stories."

The astronomy teacher next took viewers to the southern hemisphere, where she introduced them to another famous Greek love story: that of the Seven Sisters, who are represented in the sky in a constellation commonly called Pleiades.

"They are an open cluster of stars in the Taurus Constellation," Ms. Rufo said, adding that the Seven Sisters are the daughters of the Titan Atlas, who was condemned to hold up the world on his shoulders. In one version of this particular love story, Orion attempted to court all of the sisters. In order to protect the sisters, Zeus had them turned into stars. In another, the sisters wanted nothing to do with Orion, so Aphrodite turned them into stars.

"This cluster of stars, Pleiades, in Japan is called Subaru, which means to gather," Ms. Rufo explained.

Orion features in another story, this one from the native people of Brazil, where because of their location in the southern hemisphere, the position of the stars is reversed. In this story, the stars we know that make up Orion represent a man. Unfortunately for him, he got into an argument with his wife, who became so angry she cut off one of his legs.

“The moral of that story is to never get into an argument with your significant other when they are holding an ax,” Ms. Rufo joked.

The last romantic story she shared this evening was a Chinese tale, “The Legend of the Magpie Bridge.”

“The first star is one we call Altair. In the Chinese legend, he is called Niu Lang,” Ms. Rufo said. Niu Lang is a cowherd who fell in love with a princess named Zhi Nu, who was a weaver. The parents of both of them did not like the match and tried to keep the couple separated. In one version of the story, the young couple is separated by a river, represented in the sky by the Milky Way.

“This legend says the only way the lovers can meet is to cross the river,” Ms. Rufo said.

They finally managed to do so when a flock of magpies formed a bridge for them to cross. The bridge is represented by the constellation we know as Cygnus.

Ms. Rufo ended her presentation with this Chinese celestial legend, as the following day would be the first in the Lunar New Year.

“All cultures throughout the entire world have their own constellations and stories to tell,” she said.

“That was so cool,” read one of the comments in the chat feature on Zoom.

“That was awesome,” noted another.