

## Odds are good ET is out there

### Astrophysicist discusses space and whether there is life on other planets



PETERBOROUGH

By Ashley Saari

Monadnock Ledger-Transcript

Does life exist on other planets? The odds are statistically pretty good, said former NASA astrophysicist Rick Harnden of New Ipswich, during a presentation on recent NASA and other space exploration program discoveries at the Peterborough Community Theatre.

However, any planet capable of sustaining life is so far away, that it would take thousands of years to get there with our current technology, so there's little chance of proving it in the near future.

That doesn't stop Harnden, or his audience, from being fascinated with the idea.

"Everyone likes talking about it," said Harnden in an interview after his talk on Tuesday. "People are so interested in this topic."

The talk was given as part of a program by Monadnock at Home, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting area seniors who wish to stay in their own home. The program was open to the public, but mostly populated with seniors, with the exception of a handful of students from the South Meadow School robotics team. Harnden is a member of the Monadnock at Home board.

Harnden's presentation included video of photographs taken on unmanned flights to the dwarf planets Pluto and Vesta, simulations of how the probe Curiosity landed on Mars, and — the main topic of the talk — the Kepler telescope's journey outside of our solar system.

Kepler's mission is to map out potential planets around other stars in the Milky Way Galaxy, with the goal of finding another habitable planet. And Kepler has found other planets or planet-candidates — by the thousands. And nearly 20 percent of the stars that Kepler has mapped have Earth-like planets — terrestrial instead of gaseous, in the zone around the star that's close enough to have flowing water instead

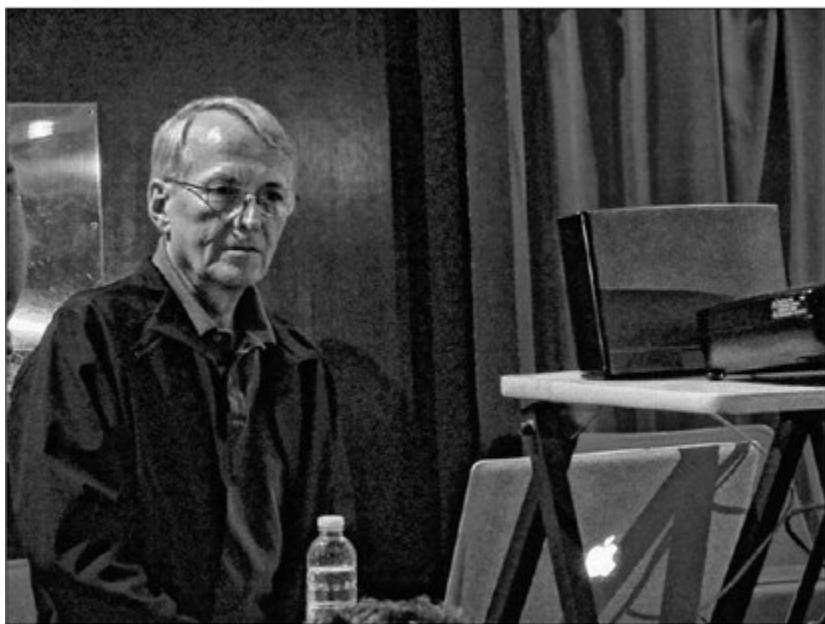
of ice, and not so close as to be bombarded with radiation.

“There are some planets on which we could theoretically live,” said Harnden. “But it would take millennia — essentially forever — to get there with our current technology.”

One of the members of the audience, Liam McCall, 12, of Peterborough, said that he hopes to become an astrophysicist. While the talk covered a lot of topics McCall was already familiar with, he did enjoy the chance to see the images from the missions to Pluto and Vesta.

And while McCall said he doubts mankind will ever be able to make contact with a world outside of our solar system in his lifetime, it’s still cool to think about.

Harnden agrees. “Some people think that crewed exploration missions are a waste of time and money, when we can get so much out of robotic missions now,” said Harnden. “But it’s like the question, ‘Why does man climb mountains?’ You have to explore planets because they’re out there.”



Left: Rick Harnden of New Ipswich gives a talk on exoplanets — planets outside of our solar system — at the Peterborough Community Theater on Tuesday.

Below: Brothers Will and Tommy Sennett of Peterborough listen to Harnden’s presentation.

Staff photos by Ashley Saari

