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Astronomy professor Judith Young stands beside the Stonehenge-like sunwheel she created behind the football stadium at the University of Massachusetts campus in Amherst.

Set in stone

UMass sports Stonehenge-like sunwheel

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AMHERST – University of Massachusetts astronomy professor Judith Young created her Stonehenge-like sunwheel behind the school's football stadium as an educational tool.

But standing in the center of the giant stone calendar on the autumnal equinox and watching the sun set directly into the opening of a 10-foot granite portal can also be a spiritual experience, she says.

"It really changes one's way of being," she said. "Because there is nothing to do but observe, watch, and notice. It's a very quiet experience. You are connected to the earth and sky in a way that doesn't often happen."

Tomorrow marks the equinox, the day the sun crosses the celestial equator, when day is equal to night. Young, as she has done for more than a decade on such days, will hold an educational gathering today and tomorrow at sunrise and sunset at the center of the UMass Sunwheel.

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JUDITH YOUNG
University of Massachusetts
astronomy professor

The sunwheel is a 130-foot diameter circle with stones set along the circumference. They mark the directions on a compass and where on the horizon the sun and moon will rise and set at various times of the year, such as the equinoxes and the solstices – the longest and shortest days of the year.

Construction began in 1996 with 12, 2-foot high stones, but

a National Science Foundation grant and donations have allowed Young to add 14 larger stones, 8- and 10-foot granite monoliths.

Four of those create portals through which the sun rises and sets on the equinox.

There are also stones to mark the moon's 18.6 year cycle along the horizon and to mark the setting directions of the bright stars Aldebaran and Sirius.

It is not a replica of Stonehenge, the ancient stone circle in England, but is similar to it and many other ancient stone calendars.

Many people express surprise when they learn that ancient civilizations had such an advanced knowledge of the movements of the solar system.

"I tell them that if you didn't have all these electronic gadgets and all you had is what is outside to look at, of course you would figure out that there was a cycle in the sky that repeats itself, and that you would be able to use it to keep track of time."

OnLine

www.umass.edu/sunwheel/

The site explains the sunwheel project, features photographs and lists upcoming events.