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United: Sun, Moon and Us

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United: Sun, Moon and Us

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Thursday April 11, 2024

By Eric F. Spina

The University of Dayton cancelled afternoon classes on Monday. Well, not exactly.

The Central Mall, dotted with students, faculty, staff, and families sprawled on blankets, turned into a massive outdoor laboratory for viewing the moon move across the sun and cast the University into twilight and then near-darkness. None of us will ever forget where we were at 3:10 p.m. on April 8 during a rare total solar eclipse. For a glorious two-and-a-half minutes, we experienced totality — together, and there was a real UD bond that deepened at that moment.

“Science is real. Science is fun. Science is spectacular,” I wrote on my Instagram feed about the phenomenon.

More than that, though, the eclipse was awe-inspiring. For one brief moment, we all looked up together and witnessed the wonder. A chill went up my spine. The sight took my breath away.

When a cloud briefly blotted out the sun a couple of minutes before totality, emcee and biologist David Wright reminded those standing near him that “we’re a faith-based institution. Keep the faith.”

As if on cue, the cloud moved away and we saw a tiny sliver of the sun before being plunged again into darkness. A collective cheer erupted.

I loved the Central Mall’s vibe, full of joy and anticipation. Dressed as a bright-yellow sun, Jason Deibel, chair of the physics department, bopped around the gathering, patiently pausing for photos with the young and the young at heart. Some in the crowd watched a clock count down the minutes and seconds. Others enjoyed picnic lunches. Wearing protective eclipse glasses, most gazed skyward, watching the sun become a crescent, growing smaller as the minutes ticked by.

“There’s going to be an alignment of the sun, the moon, and yourself,” Dr. Wright told us. “You’ll be part of a perfect alignment.”

That moment called for a perfect soundtrack. Whoever curated the eclipse playlist is a genius.

From the theme song from 2001: A Space Odyssey and King Harvest’s “Dancing in the Moonlight” to Bill Withers’ “Ain’t No Sunshine” and Cat Stevens’ “Moon Shadow,” the songs captured the day’s spirit. Bonnie Tyler’s popular “Total Eclipse of the Heart” became the afternoon’s anthem as it blared across the loudspeakers moments before the moon passed in front of the sun. Afterwards, as the sky brightened again, we were treated to the Beatles’ “Here Comes the Sun.”

Speaking of perfection, Michael Kennelly, a sophomore electrical and computer engineering technology major who’s minoring in photography, captured a stunning image of the eclipse showing a rare, ultrabright flare.

None of us could have predicted what it would feel like to soak up this awe-inspiring total solar eclipse together. But Dr. Wright sure seemed onto something when he predicted that “[UD] is the perfect place to experience this. This could be the perfect eclipse.”

It sure was.