

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

Okay fellow stargazers, here is the good news I have been waiting to tell you. The extension campus of Mid-Plains Community College in Imperial has asked me to conduct a basic observational astronomy course.

The class will begin with an indoor session on Wednesday, June 23, at 7 p.m. at the Imperial campus building located at 1320 Broadway. It will meet once a month through September with the possibility of continuing on for four more months.

If you are interested in taking this basic class contact the college extension campus at 308-882-5972. They will be able to give you further information. Note to parents, children are welcome.

The class will focus on recognizing major constellations, finding planets, and generally finding your way around the night sky. Sort of recovering what your grandparents took for granted.

Now, where was I, oh yes, alignments and conjunctions. Last week there were several astronomical conjunctions, or the close paring of two or more celestial objects. This week there will be alignments. That is several celestial objects lining up in a row.

Let's start on Friday, June 11. Looking west an hour after sunset about 10 degrees (about the width of your clenched fist held at arm's length) where you will find bright Venus.

To the right of Venus are two first magnitude stars, Pollux and Castor (in that order). They are the two primary stars in the constellation Gemini, the Twins. These two stars and Venus will be

lined up in a nice row.

Up and left of Venus past the star cluster M-44 in Cancer, the Crab, look for a fading reddish colored object. The planet Mars is still very close to Regulus, the brightest star in Leo, the Lion.

Looking further up and left is a yellowish object, the planet Saturn, and yet further a bright star, Spica, the brightest star in Virgo, the Maiden.

These three planets and three celestial objects are along a line across the sky called the Ecliptic, the path the Sun follows across the sky during the year against the background of the constellations.

The three celestial objects, M44, Regulus, and Spica, just happen to be along the line while the planets follow this line which is often called the "Path of the Planets" as it is possible to find all the planets of the solar system somewhere at sometime along this line.

If you are up and outside at about 3 a.m. MDT it will be possible to find three more planets, Jupiter, Uranus, and Neptune also aligned along the ecliptic.

The 12 constellations making up the Zodiac are aligned along the ecliptic. It is inclined about 23 and a half degrees to the plane of the celestial equator (which matches the tilt of Earth's axis).

**SKY WATCH:** New Moon, June 12. On the evening of June 14, about an hour after sunset look west for a very nice grouping of bright Venus and a very slender three-day old crescent Moon. Use binoculars to look for what is called "Earth Shine" or the reflection of sunlight off Earth's surface onto the surface of the Moon. It will look like a gray full Moon edged by the bright light of the crescent. It is often called the "New Moon in the old Moon's arms."