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Final Edition**Poor Pluto: Everyone's favorite dwarf planet;
Planetarium updates shows to reflect new classification****BYLINE:** Robin Hilmantel, Correspondent**SECTION:** CHNEWS; Pg. A1**LENGTH:** 891 words

CHAPEL HILL -- Faith Coggins never knew about Pluto when it was a planet.

The 8-year-old's introduction to it came just a few weeks ago when Lauren McLeod, her teacher at Deep River Elementary School in Sanford, read her class a book called "Poor Pluto."

"It said that Pluto didn't have a family anymore," Faith said. "He was too far out, and I sort of felt sad about it."

But when McLeod's class visited the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center recently, the third grader heard a different take on Pluto, which was reclassified by the International Astronomical Union as a dwarf planet in 2006 and then more specifically as a plutoid -- a dwarf planet that orbits the sun beyond Neptune -- in June.

The Planetarium uses the IAU's recent discussions about Pluto to teach student visitors how astronomers classify objects and how new discoveries are constantly changing the field.

Ninth no more

"Solar System Adventure" is one of two shows at the planetarium that still mention Pluto, which was the ninth planet until recently.

When the IAU drafted a new definition for "planet" in 2006 -- something that orbits the sun, has a roughly round shape and has a sufficient gravitational pull (because of its size) to have cleared the neighborhood around its orbit -- Pluto failed to meet the last qualification.

So, during "Solar System Adventure," viewers "visit" Pluto first, just after a recording explains that some scientists no longer consider it a planet. The new information was added last summer at minimal cost (the Morehead spent a few hundred dollars for the minor changes; producing a new show would have cost about \$200,000).

Planetarium educator Mickey Jo Sorrell explains to the students that Pluto is one of

five known dwarf planets in our solar system, and dozens more are expected to be discovered in the coming years.

"I thought it was awesome," said Jessica Villeda, a third-grade student at Deep River. "I'd never heard about a dwarf planet before."

"Sol & Company," a show about the solar system for young children, still calls Pluto a planet, although presenters discuss the body's new label before or after the show.

"What Happened to Pluto" and "Pluto Puzzle," two programs the Morehead offers outside of its planetarium shows, both deal specifically with how astronomers classify planets and why Pluto was demoted after 75 years of being considered one.

The great planet debate

Liam Brew remembers reading about Pluto's downgrading in the newspaper two years ago. He's now 10 and in the fifth grade at The New School in Apex.

"It made me feel like Pluto was being cheated," he said in the planetarium gift shop. "I like Pluto being a planet. But scientists say it's final."

Liam wasn't the only one who felt sorry for Pluto.

When the famous Hayden Planetarium in New York City decided to leave Pluto out of its solar system model in 2000 -- six years before the IAU removed it from the list of planets -- it sparked debate and incited the ire of Pluto fans.

"The director was getting hate mail from elementary school students," planetarium educator Sorrell said.

"A lot of what we're seeing in terms of Pluto is more of an emotional response," said Richard McColman, director of the Star Theater, the planetarium component of the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center. "Pluto's kind of like the underdog, you might say."

Pluto's last appearance at Morehead likely won't be coming anytime soon, but the way it is addressed could change even more. When the planetarium closes for extensive renovations (which could occur as early as next year), all of the Star Theater shows will be remade to make them compatible with the new full-dome digital video system that will be installed.

Assuming that the IAU confirms its decision about Pluto's planetary status at its 2009 conference, McColman said he anticipates that, while Pluto will no longer be included when the planetarium mentions the list of full-fledged planets, it will probably be included in future shows with its new classification.

'Poor Pluto'

Regardless of what astronomers decide next year, McLeod will continue to include Pluto when she makes bulletin boards about the solar system for her third-graders.

"We still put it up," she said. "I let them know that they're going to learn about Pluto because when their teacher was learning about the planets, Pluto was a planet."

McLeod's first year teaching the third grade, which includes a unit about the solar system, was the first year Pluto was no longer a planet. But that didn't bother her.

"It just offers a neat little twist," she said.

Maybe it's because Pluto has a Disney cartoon character named after it, or maybe because it's small. For whatever reason, McLeod's students seem to relate to the former planet as if it were a person.

"He's very cold, and I'm cold-natured," 8-year-old Faith said.

After McLeod read her class "Poor Pluto," a book in which a third-grade class tries to rescue Pluto after it has been demoted, her students felt sad. But after planetarium educators explained the science behind the decision, "they think it's neat that it's not a planet."

"They're kind of like little chameleons," McLeod said.

One thing is for sure: The decision has students asking plenty of questions.

"It's probably the most significant thing in recent years that got kids interested in astronomy and how science happens," Sorrell said.

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GRAPHIC: One of the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center's exhibit hall displays of the solar system, from left to right: Pluto (very small speck at far left), Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Earth, Venus and Mercury. Under a new definition of "planet" implemented in 2006, Pluto was reclassified as a plutoid, a dwarf planet. Staff Photo by Harry Lynch

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