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## [ For the past three years, Ved Chirayath's life has... ]

Daily Breeze - Torrance, Calif.  
Author: Melissa Milios DAILY BREEZE  
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### Document Text

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For the past three years, Ved Chirayath's life has revolved around a star.

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More precisely, it's revolved around a planet, revolving around a star.

Through dozens of cold, solitary, sleepless nights, the 17-year-old Carson resident has aimed his telescope at the sky and snapped countless digital photos, hoping to document the existence of this planet -- located about 150 light years away -- using all amateur, off-the-shelf equipment.

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The project won him fourth place in his category at the 2003 Intel International Science and Engineering Fair, and is a big reason why he was named this month as one of 300 semifinalists nationwide in the 2005 Intel Science Talent Search -- regarded by some as the "junior Nobel prize."

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Ved rattles off the planet's name -- HD209458B -- like an old friend's.

"Those numbers will be stuck with me forever," he said.

Scientists discovered the planet years ago, with bigger, more expensive, professional-grade telescopes. But there are a limited number of those instruments, and most aren't accessible to weekend stargazers.

Ved, who savors a challenge, looked to the latest generation of amateur telescopes and camera technology -- the crisp resolution, the sensitivity to light -- and saw a way to bring deep space into sharper focus for people like himself.

He still couldn't see the planet directly. But indirectly, by measuring the change in starlight as the planet orbited and eclipsed its star every 3 1/2 days, he set out to prove it was there.

"People were skeptical at first, because it's difficult for a top-notch observatory to see this," he said. "My thing was, 'Hey, you don't need a big telescope to see this. You just need lots of time.'"

Not that Ved had much time to spare. As a high school student at the California Academy of Math and Science, he volunteered for a Tibetan refugee organization, created and sold art-quality pottery and held down various jobs working with blind and disabled children before graduating early in December.

But ever since his fifth-grade science teacher took him to a 1997 open house at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena -- where he met moon-walking astronaut Buzz Aldrin and watched live as the Mars rover Sojourner beamed back its black-and-white pictures of the red

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planet -- Ved has had a passion for astronomy.

Starting his freshman year, he would bum rides with friends and later drive himself to spend weekends at a legendary observation point atop Mt. Pios in the Los Padres National Forest, 65 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

Far from the smog and light pollution of the city, Mt. Pios' transparent skies have attracted amateur astrophotographers since the 1950s.

On the darkest, new moon nights, the parking lot at 8,300 feet above sea level is often packed with up to 100 stargazers from all over Central and Southern California.

"It's the only place in L.A. that's still dark," Ved said. "A lot of pros come up there, and they're great for advice. Everyone's welcome -- as long as your lights are off."

But other times, because his trips were timed to the planet's transit, it was just Ved and his dogs.

He would sleep during the day and stay up all night, snapping the camera once every two or three minutes, to document changes in the star's brightness as the planet passed in front of it. Early Monday morning, he would race back to Carson for class.

Things didn't always go according to plan. Once a plane passed in front of the camera, distorting his data. Another time, it was a meteor. And once, his Nikon Coolpix camera got so cold that it froze to his Meade telescope's 10-inch lens.

In a total of 19 trips, Ved managed to get clean data for just seven transits. And just three transits were precise enough to confirm -- after the images were computer-enhanced, analyzed and graphed -- that Ved was "seeing" the gigantic planet, 1.5 times the size of Jupiter, with his amateur equipment.

It was enough to impress judges for the Intel competitions and at the 2003 California State Science Fair, where Ved took first place for physics and astronomy. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Lincoln Lab, which names minor planets after outstanding science students in grades 5-12, even named an asteroid "Chirayath" after him.

USC physicist Hans Bozler, a past president of the Southern California Academy of Arts and Sciences -- which lent its name and some funding to Ved's endeavor -- said the project documented that recent advances in technology are literally opening up the skies.

"If you can demonstrate that amateur astronomers can do things like this, the number of opportunities to really participate in the field is greatly enhanced," Bozler said.

Ved's ninth-grade science teacher and project coach, Thomas Jett, said that even among his gifted classmates at CAMS, Ved was unique.

"Focus, initiative, talent -- all in one place," Jett said. "And after all the accolades, he's definitely human."

Proof of that came Wednesday, when the 40 finalists in the 2005 Intel Science Talent Search were announced. Ved wasn't among them -- but he didn't skip a beat.

Within hours, he was on a plane to Russia, where he'll work for six weeks as a lab assistant in the astronomy department at the University of Moscow. Then he'll spend four months in India, volunteering at a Tibetan refugee camp and traveling through the country where his father was born.

To help pay for the trip, Ved resolved to sell his \$3,500 telescope. It wasn't an easy decision, he said, and even with the adventures ahead of him, he spoke wistfully about his time on Mt. Pios.

"If I had funding money, I'd go back up," Ved said, just before leaving the country. "But I think that traveling, I'll see more stars. I always stay up at night, wherever I am, to see what's different."

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

Ever since his fifth-grade science teacher took him to a 1997 open house at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena -- where he met moon-walking astronaut Buzz Aldrin and watched live as the Mars rover Sojourner beamed back its black-and-white pictures of the red planet -- [Ved] has had a passion for astronomy.

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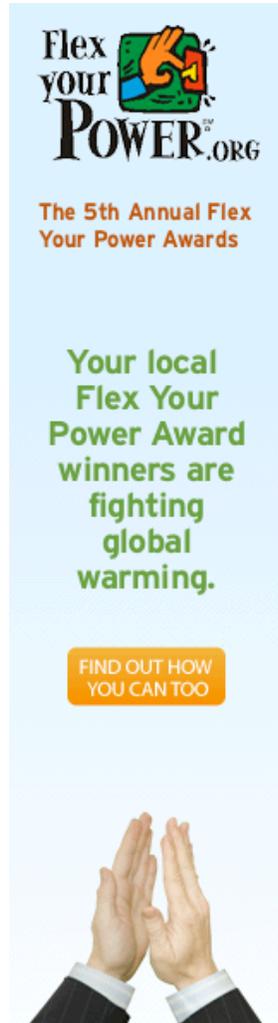
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