

Skeptics, astrologer tangle over stargazing

By WARREN EPSTEIN
Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Astrologer Janet Sciales faced a rough crowd Tuesday night.

A flaming liberal might have had an easier go of it at the Republican National Convention.

But Sciales knew she was inviting brutal scrutiny when she agreed to be the guest speaker at the University of South Florida's St. Petersburg campus for the second meeting of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, an organization dedicated to exposing fraudulent supernatural claims.

Group members had chosen Sciales as a speaker after she criticized the group's anti-astrological views in a recent BayLife story; she had said that because skeptics hadn't studied the subject as much

as she had, they were unqualified to discount it.

Sciales showed off her studies in a lecture about the "science of astrology," taking the 40-plus listeners through a rampaging take-a-breath-only-when-you-need-it tour through thousands of years of scientific and astrological development.

She added that her clients pay \$100 per session to get an expert's interpretation of how the sun's energies, which are reflected off the planets, might affect them.

The skeptics listened patiently. They applauded politely when she was done. Then they pounced.

The heaviest barrage of skeptical queries were fired in a crisp monotone by Tampa Bay Skeptics founder Dr. Gary Posner, who asked Sciales what astrologers could do beyond mimic clinical psy-

chologists.

Sciales deflected his questions with "the best defense is a strong offense" strategy.

"Can you explain to me, Dr. Posner, why it is that some of your patients recover and some of them don't?" she asked. "How come every single guy you give chemotherapy to does not walk out of your office a healthy, well being?"

"That's a non sequitur (a remark having no bearing on what was just said)," Posner answered, readjusting the aim of his Canon video camera as he spoke. "But the one-sentence answer to that is that everyone is different."

"I rest my case," Sciales said. "I'm trying to give you an explanation of why everyone is different. You haven't given me one."

"I can't answer the eternal ques-

tions of life at this time for you," Posner said flatly. "But it is straining my imagination to conceive that at the time of birth, the tiny amount of energy being reflected off the planet Mars ... somehow can affect anything."

Sciales countered, "It strains my imagination that you can hook somebody to electric shock and burn out sections of their brain and say, 'You're going to be a lot better, honey, when this is over.'"

"These are all non sequiturs that have nothing to do with the question," Posner said.

After the three-hour lecture/debate, the believers still believed and the skeptics still scoffed.

The solutions to life's mysteries would have to wait till the next meeting.