

# **A Brief History of the Sciencenter**

**Ithaca, New York**

(Rev. 1-2-10)

## **BEGINNINGS**

Founded on February 28, 1983 as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit educational organization, the Sciencenter grew out of the hands-on science program run for 15 years by volunteer teachers Debbie Levin and Ilma Levine at several Ithaca City School District elementary schools. For most of those years, the programs were based at Central Elementary School (now called Beverly J. Martin School), where Principal Beverly Martin encouraged them to set up a "science discovery room." Debbie Levin and Ilma Levine realized the special value of making science accessible, from an early age, to underserved youth. This philosophy has continued throughout the history of the Sciencenter: it is a common thread woven into the location, mission, and programs of the organization today. In 1982, an ad was placed in the *Ithaca Journal* inviting any individual interested in starting a community science center to meet at the local public library. From this group emerged a board of directors, which laid the foundation for the success of the organization. Many of them are still intimately involved with the Sciencenter, more than two decades later, as emeritus board members, advisory board members, and volunteers.

## **EARLY OPERATIONS**

The first exhibition space was opened in 1984 at 200 East Buffalo Street, in space donated by Sciarabba Walker & Co. When the Sciencenter had to move, it was able to find free space in the old Hickey's Music Store on South Tioga Street. Volunteers built exhibits, a small museum store was added, and schools were invited to bring classes for hands-on programs. From 1986 to 1989, membership and attendance grew, and the base of volunteers expanded. When the Sciencenter was forced to close its Tioga Street site to make way for a new county building, Ithaca Center Associates offered temporary space. The Sciencenter relocated to the Center Ithaca complex during 1989 and in 1990 closed its exhibit space to focus on the task of building a permanent home.

## **PLANS FOR A PERMANENT FACILITY**

By the fall of 1988, it had become clear the organization would need to find larger and more permanent quarters to remain viable in the long term. Architect Bob Leathers, nationally known for his innovative community-built playgrounds and Ithaca resident, offered his services to help design a structure that would serve as home to the Sciencenter. Leathers proposed the Sciencenter be built by members of the community – including businesspersons, secretaries, store clerks, teachers, bricklayers, electricians, university professors, doctors, grandparents, and children. The result would be a science museum that belonged to the entire community, because they had built it.

## **THE FIRST CAMPAIGN**

The campaign began in 1990 with a donation of \$50,000 by Vector Magnetics, Inc., an Ithaca technology firm. In October 1990, the board, under chair Bruce Thompson, hired registered professional engineer and geologist, Dr. Charles Trautmann, as Executive Director. The project was announced in February 1991 at a party at Rock Stream Studios, then at 235 Cherry St. in Ithaca, that was attended by 500 individuals and highlighted by presentations by Mayor Benjamin Nichols, Assemblyman Marty Luster, State Senator Jim Seward, Congressman Matt McHugh, Cornell President Emeritus Dale Corson, Nobel Laureate Hans Bethe, and Cornell astronomer Carl Sagan. Trautmann and Thompson were able to secure pledges from several donors for \$250,000 to move the project forward. Under their leadership, the Sciencenter board, staff, and volunteers developed refined architectural plans, formulated a business plan, and laid the groundwork for a \$1 million fundraising campaign. The proposed building would be about 5,000 square feet in area and would have an adjacent outdoor science park.

## **PHASE I CONSTRUCTION**

A steering committee, led by Mary Helen Cathles, Sally Grubb, and Charlie Trautmann as General Coordinators, assisted by Kathy Krafft, Barbara Thorp, Brian Corzilius, and others, helped secure donations of materials and cash. Emerson Power Transmission Corporation and Wegmans Food Markets donated cash. A \$90,000 demonstration project grant for the heating system was provided by the New York State Electric and Gas Corporation. Many other local businesses assisted with donations of building materials or deep discounts on products and services. Restaurants provided food during the building periods, as did many individuals. Cornell fundraiser Sherri Bergman, anxious to join the challenge of creating a community-built science center, was hired to help with the project. Barbara Thorp, who had 17 years of steel construction management experience, was also added to the team.

to manage operations. The cash portion of the campaign was capped with a \$100,000 challenge grant from the Kresge Foundation. A major commitment to a volunteer-built project was a first for the foundation.

Groundbreaking officially took place at a ceremony in August 1992, and construction took place between August 1992 and May 1993, with 2,200 volunteers donating more than 40,000 hours of labor to the project. Key to success was the help of several volunteers who became involved early in the project. Eric Poysa, a highly skilled worker who still volunteers full-time at the museum, joined the construction team in September 1992. Kathy Krafft, a Ph.D. physicist from Cornell, averaged 20-30 hours per week on exhibit development. She was later hired as exhibits coordinator, and is now Exhibit Projects Director. Founders Ilma Levine and Debbie Levin continue their volunteer work with the Sciencenter. Sue Spitz, a member of the original board, handles membership mailings for more than 2,700 members. Gladys McConkey, retired editor from Cornell's College of Engineering, edited the quarterly newsletter and annual report for many years. The grand opening took place on May 22, 1993, slightly less than ten months after groundbreaking. During the early days, visitors streamed into the museum at a rate of about 50,000 per year to interact with the exhibits and take part in the educational programs offered by the museum.

### **MUSEUM EXPANSION**

Exhibit development was rapid and prolific, and by 1995 a number of exhibits were in storage for lack of display space. Demand for programs continued to grow, additional NSF project grants were in hand, and the staff was twice as large as had been projected in a 1992 pre-construction business plan. To accommodate this growth, the Sciencenter leased an adjacent brick building from the City of Ithaca to provide 2,000 square feet of program space. In 1996, the City gave this building and the other half of the 600 block of First Street to the Sciencenter for \$1 following an intense year-long lobbying effort by executive director Charlie Trautmann and Ithaca Common Council member Susan Blumenthal. In 1999, the Sciencenter launched a capital campaign to expand the Sciencenter to 32,000 square feet to provide additional exhibit and program space, an early childhood area, and a discovery room. The campaign raised \$5.5 million and the expansion project was dedicated on February 28, 2003, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sciencenter's founding.

### **ADVANCEMENT**

With the museum expansion behind it, the organization could now focus on planning for future educational impact and building systems to support these strategic plans. Lara Kimber was hired in August 2004 as the Sciencenter's first Director of Advancement and was charged with creating a team to integrate the areas of development, membership, marketing, communications and public/media relations to advance the mission of the Sciencenter. Key priorities included: growing the annual fund, developing an individual giving program, raising funds for special projects, and growing the Sciencenter endowment. In 2006, the Sciencenter secured a grant from the Park Foundation to integrate front desk and development/membership computer systems and to experiment with targeted marketing strategies to increase attendance. These targeted marketing approaches, combined with a redesigned website, online giving and membership purchase/renewal, and revamped communications pieces helped the Sciencenter better connect with donors, members, visitors, members of the media, and the general public.

### **VISITOR SERVICES AND OPERATIONS**

Attendance grew dramatically with the opening of the 2003 expansion, and the Sciencenter now hosts 100,000 visitors from all 50 states, 60 foreign countries, and six continents each year. In 2007, following the retirement of Barbara Thorp after fifteen years at the Sciencenter, the museum formed a new Visitor Services and Operations team, under the leadership of Kerry Flannery. This new team transformed front desk operations and membership sales, and oversaw a significant improvement in Sciencenter Store merchandising. Volunteers continue to assist with many aspects of the operation, including serving as museum guides, assisting with member services, working on building and grounds maintenance, and delivering educational programs. With the help of volunteers, the Sciencenter organizes a number of free community events, including the *Egg Drop* and annual Halloween *Spooky Science* events.

### **EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS**

The museum runs a variety of programs: on-site and off-site, school-based and non-school-based. In 2007, under the leadership of Rae Ostman, Director of Education, the Sciencenter completed a 5-year master plan for education that outlined three strategies for realizing maximum educational impact: a breadth strategy (focusing on strengthening programming for existing core museum audiences), a depth strategy (focusing on longer, repeated educational programming for middle and high school-aged youth) and a teacher professional development strategy (focusing on elementary science).

## **SCIENCENTER EXHIBITS**

The goal of many exhibits at the Sciencenter is to give visitors direct, open-ended experiences with the process of science. A unique feature of the Sciencenter is the outdoor science park, a series of interconnected ramps and structures containing more than two dozen playground-type activities related to physics, engineering, and geology. In 2008, the Emerson Science Park (named in recognition of the Emerson Power Transmission Corporation, which provided funding for its development) was part of a major outdoor capital improvement project that – in the spirit of past community build events – brought together 275 volunteers from the community to enhance the park, and other outdoor learning spaces at the museum.

In 1997, the Sciencenter opened the Sagan Planet Walk, an outdoor walking scale model of the solar system named in memory of Carl Sagan, a member of the Sciencenter’s advisory board until his death in December 1996. The exhibition is 1,200 meters long and extends from the Commons in downtown Ithaca to the Sciencenter. An audio tour for cell phones and media players, narrated by Bill Nye, was added in 2003, and the Asteroid station, featuring a real meteorite, was added in 2009.

The Sciencenter’s traveling exhibition program took on a national flavor in 1996 with the receipt of a major grant from the National Science Foundation. The Sciencenter was one of five founding members of a national exhibition collaborative for small museums called TEAMS (Traveling Exhibitions At Museums of Science), which received a \$1.2 million grant to produce 5 separate traveling exhibitions. These were completed in 1999 and several are still on tour. The Sciencenter’s contribution, “FUN, 2, 3, 4: All About a Number of Things!,” has 15 exhibits on measuring, graphing, counting, and estimating. The Sciencenter’s first major solo NSF grant was called “Tech City” and led to the development of a 3,000-square-foot exhibition that began a national tour in 2003. Over the following years, a number of other major grants were received, including two extensions of the NSF TEAMS grant in 2000 and 2004, additional NSF grants through Cornell University, and a number of NASA Education and Public Outreach grants. The Sciencenter’s exhibits staff has grown considerably, and is managing and supporting a portfolio of traveling exhibitions currently including 13 exhibitions, seven of which were developed by the Sciencenter, with others coming from exhibition collaboratives who have contracted with the Sciencenter based on its growing reputation in exhibition tour management among small museums.

Galaxy Golf, an 18-hole science-based mini-golf course, was built in 2004. Two major exhibitions on nanotechnology, “It’s a Nano World” and “Too Small to See” were completed in 2003 and 2007, and both opened at INNOVENTIONS at Epcot® at the Walt Disney World® Resort in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. Additional exhibitions “Here to the Ocean” and “Sonic Sensation” are currently under development.