

When Big Is Walkable: Sciencenter's Sagan Planet Walk



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Nick Sagan, son of the late Carl Sagan, stands in front of the sun stop on the Sagan Planet Walk, located on Ithaca's Commons.

By Michael Nocella

Inspiring awe and wonder. Giving people an appreciation for how much space is in space. And doing so, at a cost anyone could afford: free. This was the vision the Sciencenter staff and executive director Charles Trautmann had when they first put the project of the Sagan Planet Walk in motion in 1995.

The walk was named in honor of the late Carl Sagan, who was a member of the Sciencenter advisory board before his death December 20, 1996, from complications of a bone marrow disease. The astronomer was also a member of the faculty at Cornell University and the recipient of three Emmys, a Peabody Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for his work in science writing.

The Sciencenter unveiled the Sagan Planet Walk on Saturday, November 8, 1997, fittingly on the eve of Dr. Sagan's 63rd birthday. To this day, Sagan's name sits comfortably in front of an experience that celebrates everything he stood for.

"Carl liked the idea of making it open to everyone," said Trautmann. "He was a purist in the sense that knowledge should be readily available to anyone who is interested. This walk has and always will represent that desire."

Not only does the walk commemorate Sagan's affinity for free information, it does so in unique and accurate fashion. For Sagan's son Nick, who is a science-fiction novelist and screenwriter, these characteristics have helped build the perfect atmosphere for his father's legacy.

"It's wonderful that a scale model of our solar system exists here in Ithaca," said the younger Sagan, "The distances in outer space are so mind-bendingly vast that it's often hard for people to grasp the true scope of it."

Sagan noted another aspect of the walk that can't be found in many scale models that try to accomplish the same thing: capturing a sense of astonishment in a distance that is still walkable.

"It helps to make those distances understandable while providing helpful facts about each celestial body along the way," he said. "Making space science accessible and fun is an important part of what Dad was about and it's great to see that ethos reflected by these esthetically pleasing monoliths around town."

The eye-pleasing monoliths to which Sagan referred are strung along a 1.2 km stretch starting from the center of The Commons in downtown Ithaca and extending to the Sciencenter. Each station is a stone ap-

proximately six feet tall with a clear Plexiglas window at eye level. The width of window represent diameter of the Sun. The other windows hold scale models of each planet that show their size in comparison with the Sun's.

Your journey begins at a monolith for the Sun. From there the Planet Walk scales everything in the solar system to one five-billionth ($1/5,000,000,000$) of its actual size. Both the size of the planets and the distance between them are accurately scaled and displayed.

“To my knowledge, most models like this don't use the same scale for size and distance we do. They use either smaller or much larger scales, which tend to lose that sense of awe we strive for,” said Trautmann. “I think we were kind of ahead of the game in that regard, as our model has seemed to popularize walking planet[ary] scales. I know some stretch the distance to 20 miles or more. To me, when you have to go through that much trouble to get through all nine planets, it doesn't have quite the same effect.”

And what an effect it is. As you walk through all 11 stops on the walk, you begin to realize how much space exists in, well, space. Visitors can explore the four inner planets (Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars) and then walk a good stretch towards the outer planets (Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune), and to the final destination of Pluto, which stands outside the Sciencenter. In between, you can touch a real meteorite at the Asteroid Belt Station – a representative from the actual asteroid belt that exists in space between the two planet groups.

“It is the only public, unguarded meteorite in the world,” said Trautmann, who noted the meteorite addition occurred a couple of years ago. “Its accessibility is once again testament to Carl Sagan's spirit.”

As if a beautiful, easily doable, freely accessible planet walk wasn't enough, an expert tour guide can always be attained at a moment's notice. All they have to do is reach for their phone.

In doing this, visitors can learn more about the solar system and the planets as they explore them with an audio tour from the one and only Billy Nye the Science Guy. By calling 703-637-6237, listening to the podcast version at www.sciencenter.org/saganpw, or downloading the podcast on iTunes, planet walkers can listen to fascinating facts from Nye (who also studied at Cornell) for – you guessed it – free.

“I was with Bill when we did the walk and the recordings for each stop,” said Trautmann. “He only needed one take for each one, which is impressive if you listen to them because they're quite interesting, and as always, his presentation is one of a kind.”

For those who wish to experience the Sagan Planet Walk in its entirety, it can take as little as 15 minutes. That, however, will not be the case for long. On September 28, 2012, the Sciencenter will add one last stop ... in Hawaii.

“We are adding a monolith for the nearest star to our sun: Alpha Centauri, which is 4.3 light years away from the actual sun,” said Trautmann. “And since we want to maintain our accurate $1/5,000,000,000$ scaling, that takes us all the way to Hawaii.”

The monolith will be even more striking than those that stand in Ithaca, as it will be a sculpture carved out of Hawaiian volcanic rock, surrounded by a floor design that will represent star-compasses of Polynesian voyagers, who used celestial navigation.

“It's going to be really neat,” said Trautmann. “It's definitely something Carl would be proud to see.”

http://www.ithaca.com/visit_ithaca/article_cd5c7c46-b57f-11e1-8585-0019bb2963f4.html