

Sciencenter Celebrates 30th Anniversary

By Jim Catalano

The Sciencenter will mark 30 years of cultivating curiosity in scientific topics with a two-day celebration this weekend. Visitors will be able to take part in dozens of activities, including the Touch Tank, the Discovery Space, Showtime! and much more, as well as tour current exhibitions such as “From Here to There,” which explores how things move by land, sea or air.

Charles Trautmann has been the Sciencenter’s executive director since 1990, but he has been involved with the organization from the beginning, when it was founded by Debbie Levin and Ilma Levine, both volunteer science teachers at Beverly J. Martin School, who wanted to inspire more children to be interested in science.

“It’s gone beyond our wildest dreams,” he said earlier this week. “We had no clue when we started out as to where it was going to go. It was a very local operation and very local effort to get kids in Tompkins County interested in science. So it was originally called the Science Discovery Center of Tompkins County. We changed the name to Sciencenter — no Ithaca — because as things started to grow we realized we had more impact than in Tompkins County.”

After bouncing among several different downtown storefronts during its first decade, the center started to grow when it moved to its current location at 601 First St. in 1993. Three phases of construction have resulted in the facility, which draws 100,000 visitors annually.

“Once we got into this space, we started hiring staff and working more closely with Cornell, and building more exhibits that traveled the country — and now the world, as we’re in negotiation a deal to send one of our exhibitions to Sweden” Trautmann said. “It’s really just mushroomed. We used to think of ourselves as a small science center — and we still are — but our staff and our volunteers are doing things that are global in scale now.”

The Sciencenter has more than 200 exhibits, most of which provide hands-on experience. “It is part of our mission statement, which is ‘to inspire excitement for science through interactive exhibits and programs that engage, educate and empower,’” Trautmann said.



“We are focused on children up to age 14 — preschool, elementary and middle school kids and their families are our key target audiences,” he said. “And the way kids learn is through their hands, they don’t like to just sit and get lectured at. So almost everything you see on the museum floor is interactive in some way, just to get conversation going between kids and adults.”

Trautmann said the Sciencenter’s goal is to get kids motivated about science so they’ll have more interest in the subject at school. “The schools have kids five days a week for six hours a day,” he said. “We maybe have them a couple of hours a year, but the idea is we can show them the fun side of science, and that it’s more than a collection of boring facts, which is the way it’s often taught in school. It gets to be fun when they use it to learn something new or investigate something to make an important decision.”

“Science is for everybody,” he added. “It’s a way of learning about living in the world that we living in and making decisions on the personal level — say about health or nutrition— or a community level — what do we do about hydrilla or should we do fracking— or on a global scale — like climate change. So science has so much to offer as to how we make sense out of this very confusing world that we live in.”

Sciencenter hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Regular admission prices will apply Saturday — \$8 for adults, \$7 for seniors, \$6 for children 3-17 years, and free to members and children under 3. Admission is free for everyone on Sunday, courtesy of sponsor M&T Bank. For more information, visit www.sciencenter.org or call 272-0600.