

Putting Clues Together: Sciencenter Sets Up Forensic Science Exhibit

By Erin Barrett

The home of Dr. Jonathan Johnson and his wife Jennifer was the scene of a burglary while the family was away on vacation in Hawaii. The bicycle tire tracks and footprints left at the scene, along with a small amount of blood providing DNA evidence, should help science sleuths visiting the Sciencenter's new "Crime Lab Detective" exhibit solve the mystery of "whodunit."

The traveling exhibit, sponsored by the Maguire Family of Dealerships, was developed by the Museum of Discovery in Little Rock, Arkansas, and debuted to members of the Sciencenter who got first crack at the mystery on Friday, Sept. 13. Members who attended the event were able to preview the exhibit, participate in a hands-on demonstration turning strawberry DNA into necklaces, and view a New York State Trooper canine unit demonstration.

"The purpose of the exhibit," said Sciencenter public and media relations manager Teresa Bell, "is to introduce people who are familiar with the world of crime fighting as seen on TV, to real-world forensics."

The exhibit opened to the public Saturday, Sept. 14 and will run into the new year. At the start of the exhibit, visiting detectives are given the choice between a long version and a short version of the "Crime Lab Detective Notebook," depending on how in-depth they want to investigate.

The first stop of the investigation is watching a brief news story as an introduction to the mystery. Next visitors investigate the crime scene: a split display of the outside of the house, the broken window through which the culprit entered, and the inside of the home. Participants are told to use their powers of observation to sketch what they see, marking important clues on a diagram of the scene included in the notebook.

The third stop is at the interrogation kiosk to listen to the statements made to the police by a cast of colorful characters, including the Johnsons and their acquaintances. Here's a hot tip: without having seen any evidence or heard any testimony, Webley Silvers, Dr. Johnson's lab assistant, looks like a credible perp.

Next comes laboratory testing of the evidence gathered by police, including microscopic views of soil samples, matching casts of footprints and tire prints to shoe soles and tires, a gel electrophoresis chamber in the blood lab, handwriting and fingerprint analysis, and a physical evidence wall displaying various insects that were found at the scene.

After having thoroughly examined the evidence, detectives are then asked to name the guilty party and proceed to the solution kiosk to see if they are correct. According to director of exhibits Tim Scott, the exhibit can change guilty parties throughout its run to allow for return visits.



Kids huddle over evidence at "Crime Lab Detective" (Ed Dittenhoefer)

Throughout the course of the exhibit, the museum will feature interactive hands-on activities such as "Fingerprinting:" look closely at your own fingerprints; "Ink Detective:" use paper chromatography to identify mystery ink; "Mystery Liquid:" identifying an unknown liquid; "Mystery Powder:" testing chemical reactions to determine the powder; and "Secret Message:" writing a hidden message using invisible ink.

In an ongoing celebration of the museum's 30th anniversary, the Sciencenter is also hosting a community scavenger hunt. The hunt, which opened to members last Friday, opens to the public Friday, Sept. 20. Forms for the scavenger hunt will be available online, all completed forms returned to the Sciencenter will be entered into a raffle featuring prizes such as memberships and gift certificates. One grand prizewinner and their family will receive a Cosmos level membership and an exclusive tour of the Ithaca Police Department Criminal Investigations Unit.

If you are a fan of science, interactive museums, indoor fun on a rainy day or silly dates, but worry the Sciencenter is only for people with children, worry no longer. Bell assures readers that the Sciencenter is open to all and in fact, she plans to bring her own husband through the new exhibit sometime soon.

Admission to the Sciencenter is free to members and children under three, \$6 for children 3-17, \$8 for adults and \$7 for seniors; the museum is open Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sun 12 p.m. to 5p.m. For more information call 607-272-0600 or visit www.sciencenter.org.

Online: http://www.ithaca.com/family_and_health/sciencenter-sets-up-a-forensic-science-exhibit/article_8aa35ff4-209b-11e3-a84d-001a4bcf887a.html