

A History of the Sciencenter

BEGINNINGS

Founded in May 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 program was based at Central Elementary School (now Beverly J. Martin Elementary School), where Principal Beverly Martin encouraged them to set up a "science discovery room." Debbie and Ilma 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, a number of interested members of the community met at the Tompkins County Public Library and formed the board of directors of the Sciencenter. Many of them are still intimately involved with the Sciencenter, as emeritus board members, advisory board members, volunteers, or supporters.

EARLY OPERATIONS

The first exhibition space opened in 1984 at 200 East Buffalo Street, in space donated by Sciarabba Walker & Co., a local CPA firm. When the space became rented and the Sciencenter had to move, the museum found free space available 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.

By fall of 1988, it was clear that the organization would need to find a larger and more permanent facility for the long term. It was proposed that 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 center that belonged to the entire community.

MOVING TO A PERMANENT FACILITY

By 1991, the museum had completed a business plan, hired Dr. Charles Trautmann as Executive Director, and launched a successful capital campaign with help from local businesses, individual donors, national foundations, and notable scientists and community members: Cornell astronomer Carl Sagan, Mayor Benjamin Nichols, State Senator Jim Seward, Congressman Matt McHugh, Cornell President Emeritus Dale Corson, and Nobel Laureate Hans Bethe.

Construction on Phase 1 – a 5,000 square foot museum with an adjacent outdoor science park – took place between August 1992 and May 1993. The museum was built on the site of the former water treatment plant for the City of Ithaca. In total, 2,200 volunteers from the community donated over 40,000 hours to the project. The grand opening took place on May 22, 1993, only nine months after groundbreaking.

MUSEUM EXPANSIONS

By 1995, the Sciencenter's demands for exhibit development and staffing space had exceeded the confines of the facility. In order to accommodate this growth, the Sciencenter leased, and in 1996 acquired, the adjacent brick building for \$1 through the Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency of the City of Ithaca. The space was renovated by volunteers to provide 2,000 square feet of additional program space. Then from 1999 to 2002, the Sciencenter raised \$5.6 million to renovate the entire facility and expand it to 32,000 square feet. From 2001 to 2003, more than 1,200 volunteers, including Bill Nye (The Science Guy), donated over 6,000 hours to frame the addition. The expansion was completed on February 28, 2003, on the 20th anniversary of the Sciencenter's founding. Since then, a number of smaller expansions have taken place. In 2010, the Sciencenter purchased a building at 233 Cherry St., providing much-needed shop and storage space and allowing the museum to stage, house, and maintain a growing portfolio of innovative, high-quality science exhibitions. Today, the Sciencenter hosts about 112,000 guests each year, from all 50 states, 60 foreign countries, and six continents. Volunteers continue to be involved in various aspects of museum operation: as museum guides, with member services, in exhibit development and maintenance, with building and grounds maintenance, and in the delivery of educational programs.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

The Sciencenter's educational programs emphasize hands-on, informal science learning for all ages and abilities. Education staff and volunteers deliver outreach programs in rural communities, provide portable planetarium shows with a StarLab, organize field trips for middle and elementary school classes, provide interactive programs on the museum floor, organize summer camp, facilitate the Future Science Leaders program, and run regular community programs like Showtime, Spooky Science, and Sensory Hours (a complete list is available later in this section).

EXHIBITS

The goal of the Sciencenter's exhibits is to empower guests through direct, open-ended experiences with science, technology, engineering, and math, both indoors and outdoors. Initially built entirely by volunteers, the Sciencenter's exhibits have evolved into a unique combination of open-ended inquiry, exploration of scientific principles, and interactive experiences with issues or topics such as climate change, health of the oceans, environmental quality, earthquakes, and astronomy. A professional team of exhibit developers has a 4,000-SF shop in the museum's basement and 5,000-SF of additional space at the museum's Cherry St. facility. Some key current exhibitions include:

- **Science Park** - an outdoor science playground with dozens of exhibits on motion, sound, water, and light. The main goal is to for children to experience that science is all around them, to gain confidence that they can do science, and to see that science is often a collaborative process.
- **Mars and Stars** – a series of exhibits on astronomy. The main goal is to stimulate curiosity about the universe and experience how scientists use principles of light, heat, and geometry to explore the universe in which we live.
- **Sagan Planet Walk** – a model of the Solar System at 1 to 5-billion scale, with the Sun on the downtown Ithaca Commons, the dwarf planet Pluto at the Sciencenter, and the planets to scale in between. The nearest star, Alpha Centauri, is represented by a station in Hawaii. The main goal is to stimulate awe and critical thinking about the scale of the universe and our place within it.
- **Saltonstall Animal Room** – a collection of fish, reptiles, amphibians, and arthropods from various environmental habitats throughout the world. The main goal is for guests to appreciate the need for maintaining biodiversity in the world and to empower them to preserve natural habitats.
- **Curiosity Corner** – a space for children under 4 with opportunities to explore water, air, and many other areas of science. The main goal is to stimulate curiosity and creativity in young children.
- **Discovery Space** – a room where children and adults can explore two dozen topics through self-contained activity kits called “Discovery Boxes.” The main goal is for children and parents to develop the capacity to discover science together in a setting where parents are coaches and facilitators, rather than teachers.

The Sciencenter has developed a robust traveling exhibitions program that maintains an inventory of 10-12 exhibitions for rent by other museums. Two staff members market, tour, and maintain the exhibitions, which typically reach about 1 million museum guests outside of Ithaca each year.

Much of the exhibits team's efforts are currently focused on the overarching vision of empowerment and directed toward modifying or replacing exhibits to enhance their capacity to empower young people “to use science in shaping a better future” for themselves, their community, and the global world beyond.

NATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

The Sciencenter has also been an active member of many national collaborations since its founding. Involvement in these collaborations has broadened the Sciencenter's impact far beyond our local footprint. As a founding member of the NSF-funded TEAMS exhibition collaborative, the Sciencenter helped create a model for developing hands-on exhibits for smaller museums. The Sciencenter also serves as the northeast hub leader for the NISE (National Informal STEM Education) Network and serves in other network leadership roles. Most recently, the Sciencenter is a lead member of a collaborative of six museums to define best practices in early science teacher professional development for Head Start teachers.