Discover the World: Eight-member Discovery Trail explores nature, science and culture

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By Eric Banford

The Discovery Trail is a museum-library partnership between eight member organizations that have been collaborating for nearly two decades to help visitors explore nature, science, and culture. Each month, we’ll be exploring each one of the sites, highlighting their offerings and taking a look at their impact in the community.

Discovery Trail partners include Cayuga Nature Center, Cornell Botanic Gardens, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell, Museum of the Earth, Sciencenter, The History Center in Tompkins County, and Tompkins County Public Library.

The idea for the Discovery Trail came about in 1999 when the director of the Tompkins County Public Library invited the directors from local museums to a lunch discussion about their common needs of funding, programming, and how to broaden their audiences. That the different organizations could accomplish much more together than separately was immediately obvious, so they continued to meet and plan.

Initial attempts to secure grants failed, but the process brought the partners closer, and soon they were planning joint educational projects and marketing, and eventually funding started to fall into place. After nine years as an informal partnership, the Discovery Trail adopted bylaws and became a 501c3 organization in 2008, and is now supported by a full-time executive director, student interns, marketing and educational committees, and volunteers.
In 2004, the president of the Ithaca Public Education Initiative approached the Discovery Trail and suggested collaboration with the local school system to enhance the school systems formal educational program through the Discovery Trail’s informal educational offerings. After a year of intense planning, a pilot program called “Kids Discover the Trail!” was born, and 13 years later has grown to serve 80 percent of elementary students attending public schools in Tompkins County and several of the remaining elementary classes in the other four school districts countywide.

“The Discovery Trail is unique in the museum field worldwide,” said Charlie Trautmann, founding chair of the Discovery Trail board and still a board member. “No other community has been able to create and sustain a collaborative group like it.”

Having watched the trail grow since its inception, Trautmann is excited about the potential for reaching even more people.

“Initially, the Discovery Trail found a unique niche in promoting cultural awareness while also enhancing our public schools,” he said. “Now, we’re excited about the prospect of growing our signature program, Kids Discover the Trail!, to serve literally every student in Tompkins County – from pre-K through Grade 5 – every year.”

“Kids Discover the Trail! inspires curiosity in culture, art, science and the natural world among children in Tompkins County,” added Star Bressler, executive director of the Discovery Trail. “Our goal is to provide equal access to hands-on learning and resources for ALL elementary school children in Tompkins County.”

According to Bressler, during the 2017-18 school year KDT! will serve 80 percent of children attending public schools in Tompkins County.

“We’re excited to continue to grow our program until every child benefits from the rich educational resources along the Discovery Trail,” she said. “Our goal or mission is to create a community that is curious about learning and has more awareness about the resources that are here in Ithaca. KDT! is an amazing collaboration between all of our partners,” added Bressler. “Our goal is to increase hands-on, experiential learning, to create equal access to learning, and to create awareness of the resources at the Discovery Trail sites.”

Each of the eight Discovery Trail sites is linked to a grade level, pre-K through 5th grade, with each class taking a field trip to one site each year. Pre-visit materials are shared with each class with the goal of supporting the formal school curriculum.

“Each child receives a free book that they get to keep, it reinforces the content of the trip. Student’s also receive a free family come-back pass for sites that charge admission,” said Bressler. “Last year around 4,000 children participated, this year we will expand to serve 4,400.”

The program fills a deep educational need in our community as expressed by a teacher in a recent evaluation: “What an amazing field trip we had today! Just absolutely worthwhile, educational, engaging, and fun. As one of the kids said as we were leaving, ‘That was the best. I would do that again tomorrow.’ That certainly says it all.”

According to evaluations, more than 30 percent of parents polled have reported doing something at home with their children based on the field trip.

Another benefit of the different trail sites working together has been a shift from seeing each other as competitors to true collaboration.

“The Discovery Trail has been an important partnership in several ways,” said Warren Allmon, Discovery Trail board chairperson. “It has enhanced the visibility of an important set of organizations in a very crowded local cultural and not-for-profit landscape, and it has reduced potential competition and increased real cooperation and collaboration among those organizations.

“It has connected Cornell units to the community and vice versa,” he added, “and in KDT! it has provided the basis for an amazingly successful grassroots effort to make the offerings of our local museums and public library more widely available to the people of Tompkins County.”

Bressler grew up in Ithaca, and after living in San Francisco, she appreciates the magnitude of natural beauty and cultural resources available in her hometown.

“I’m very grateful that the Discovery Trail partners provide access to a diverse range of quality exhibits and engaging programs,” she said. “I would encourage people to explore the unique experiences available at each of the partner locations.”

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