

Voice of the Spheres

BILL NYE PROVIDES THE SCIENCENTER'S PLANET WALK WITH A NEW AUDIO TOUR

by Diana Denner

THE space shuttle Discovery, 200 miles above the earth's surface, gets a good sharp view of Ithaca, named after the legendary home of Ulysses in Greek mythology. One way to go further into the atmosphere, where you can touch the ground, is to take a stroll on the Sagan Planet Walk from the Commons in downtown Ithaca to the Sciencenter on First Street and hear about the solar system in an audio tour by Bill Nye, "The Science Guy."

"Neptune, it's always cold," Nye says of one of the 10 space stations that represent the sun and nine planets. "It doesn't seem to have any solid surface. Instead, it's got clouds made of hydrogen and helium. There might be crystals of natural gas floating around in it. We don't know much about it because it's so far away."

MP3 and iPod users can download the tour for free from the Sciencenter at www.sciencenter.org by clicking on the link "Sagan Planet Walk podcast." To access the free audio tour by cell phone call (703) 637-6237 and follow the instructions to play the presentation. Cell phone users can dial the number listed on each space

station of the exhibit.

"The number is a free call supported through a grant from Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Planning Board," said Lara Kimber, associate director for advancement.

The Planet Walk is named for Ithacan Carl Sagan, the Cornell University astronomer who hosted the popular TV series "Cosmos" for many years. The citywide display was conceived by Sciencenter executive director Charles Trautmann.

The tour uses an exhibit guide, "Passport to the Solar System," written by Ann Druyan, partner of the late astronomer and a Sciencenter advisory board member. "It provides a log as you walk through, learning facts that aren't on the monuments, and takes it to the next level," Kimber said. The guide can be purchased throughout town and at the Sciencenter for \$2.

The audio tour has 11 one-minute segments featuring the voice of "The Science Guy," a 1977 graduate of Cornell with a degree in mechanical engineering and also a student of Sagan's. Nye also

has honorary doctorate degrees from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) and Goucher College.

Nye, best known for his TV show that at first ran on weekends and then aired on PBS five nights a week, has won seven national Emmy Awards for writing, performing and producing the program, which won 28 Emmys in five years.

"[With] its beautiful rings made from the same stuff as moons, it takes Saturn 30 years to go around the sun," according to Nye. "Pluto, is it a planet? Depends on how you look at it," he says. "It's made of ice. If it were discovered today nobody would consider it a planet because it's so small; instead it should be considered an ice dwarf, an icy plutonium planet."

Nye received two patents on educational products — a magnifier made of water and an abacus that does math like a computer. His patent on a device to help people learn to throw a baseball better is still pending. His next patent is an improved toe shoe for ballerinas.

Nye currently hosts the television series "The 100 Greatest Discoveries" that airs on the Science Channel. "The Eyes of Nye" airs on PBS stations across the country.

Nye visits Cornell regularly as part of the Frank H.T. Rhodes Visiting Professorship program. After being invited to attend a meeting at Cornell to talk about the nascent missions to Mars, in 1998, Nye took one look at the "photometric calibration targets," and said, "Hey, we've got to make these into sundials."

That led to his work on the setup and promotion of the EarthDial Project, a



Able McSurely-Bradshaw tries out the Sciencenter's new audio tour of the Planet Walk, narrated by Bill Nye "The Science Guy."

Photo: Amelia Burns

set of sundials around the world visually reminiscent of the MarsDials and linked together on the Web. People everywhere can use the site and learn more about the process of building their own sundials to gain a deeper understanding of geography, astronomy and the complex system of timekeeping.

"He's been a friend of Sciencenter for a very long time," Kimber said. "He's a visiting Rhodes scholar." Nye was asked to speak at Sagan's memorial service and has since moved from being a regular member of the Planetary Society to becoming a member of the Sciencenter's board of directors. ■