

Chamber recognizes Cornell, Sciencenter

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ITHACA — What treasures make Tompkins County unique?

That was the question guest speaker and community builder Jeff Bercuvitz posed to members of the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce and guests Friday afternoon at its celebration recognizing the first annual Not-for-Profit of the Year and the Large Business of the Year awards.

For the chamber in 2006, the answer is two-fold: the Sciencenter and Cornell University. Since its founding in 1983, the not-for-profit Sciencenter has tripled in physical size and received grants from NASA and the National Science Foundation. Cornell, the county's largest employer, continues to rack up awards as a top place to work.

The Sciencenter started in 1983 with a \$280 founding gift from local school children and staff. It now has a 32,000-square foot facility, thanks to a series of community builds, and attracts 85,000 visitors a year.

"Every time it's closing time and we hear another 3-year-old scream because they don't want to leave, we figure, 'another satisfied customer,'" Charles Trautmann, Sciencenter executive director, said.

The center's mission is not only to educate children in science but to help them see its relevance to their daily lives, he said.

Trautmann announced Friday a new initiative supporting that goal. The center plans to incorporate sustainability in its future exhibitions and family workshops. For example, an alternative energy workshop could bring children and parents together to build a windmill and analyze what factors affect its productivity. The Sciencenter is seeking grants and endowment gifts to assist in developing such programming.

"What we want to do is to help people understand that science is an integral component of a sustainable future," Trautmann said.

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In addition, the center has committed 1 percent of its budget to address internal sustainability practices, including buying green and reducing the center's carbon footprint, among others.

Mary George Opperman, vice president of Cornell University's Office of Human Resources, opened her remarks with a story of her move 10 years ago to Ithaca from Massachusetts. The Sciencenter played a key role in her children's acceptance of their new home, she said.

She continued by saying that it might seem natural that Cornell would receive the Large Business award simply because of its size. The university has 1,500 faculty and about 9,000 nonacademic and support staff.

"It is true that we are big," she said, adding however, "(Recent awards) signify that Cornell has much more to offer than size alone."

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In the last two years, Cornell has been named a top employer for working mothers, workers over 50, and post-doctoral candidates. It was also named the best campus for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

Many of its employees also give back to the community through United Way, Toys for Tots, and volunteerism.

"We are part of this county and proud to be," Opperman said.

When asked how an institution of Cornell's size successfully maintains quality relationships with so many employees, Opperman said, "We put a lot of energy into reaching all our staff. Our key aim is to be sure we're listening. It's always a work in progress."

Community role models, such

as the Sciencenter and Cornell, are not to be taken for granted, the guest speaker said.

Bercuvitz, who recently launched Sparks! The Center for Creative Community Building, delivered a pre-awards talk titled "Small Sparks: The Six Hottest Tips for Using Personal Pleasures and Ithaca's Treasures to Bring People Together and Build Community."

He challenged audience members to envision how to use their own personal interests to build excitement around a cause. For inspiration, he drew on comical real-life scenarios he has seen during his 20-year career coaching community leaders and activists nationally and internationally. Tales ranged from grannies who use a group walk to spread wildflower seeds, to storytelling contests in Scottish

pubs designed to raise awareness about city politics.

Bercuvitz stressed the importance of creativity in overcoming obstacles.

"We don't really lack for resources, we lack resourcefulness," he said.

He encouraged listeners to build partnerships, make new mistakes (don't be afraid to try), turn negatives into positives, and "think big, start small."

The two new Chamber of Commerce awards bring the total annual awards presented by the Chamber of Commerce to four. The chamber also recognizes a New Business of the Year and David R. Strong Small Business of the Year. Earlier this fall, Felicia's Atomic Cafe won the new business award and the Strebel Planning Group won the small business award.