

Welcome to The Ithaca Journal - Ithaca, NY

Customer Service: [Subscribe Now](#) | [Place an Ad](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Make us your Homepage](#) | [Newsstand Locations](#)

[theithacajournal.com](#) [Weather](#) [Jobs](#) [Cars](#) [Real Estate](#) [Apartments](#) [Shopping](#) [Classifieds](#) [Dating](#)

theithacajournal.com

Search Ithaca All

Go

Sponsored by

Saturday, February 23, 2008

- » Home
- » News
- Local News
- Local Sports
- HS Boys Basketball
- HS Girls Basketball
- Election Coverage
- Calendar
- Opinion
- Obituaries
- Forums
- Photo Galleries
- Videos
- Celebrations
- Weather
- Travel
- Nation/World
- Technology
- Archives
- » Entertainment
- » Life
- » IthacaMoms.com
- » Communities
- » RSS Feeds [XML](#)
- » Customer Service

Email Updates
Sign up Here!

ADVERTISEMENT

Ithaca's Sciencenter turns 25

School program grows into world-renowned museum

By Tophir Sanders
Journal Staff

ITHACA — Nearly 40 years ago two colleagues began sharing the world of science with elementary students in the basement of what is now the Greater Ithaca Activities Center.

"We really started by accident when we were volunteers in the Ithaca school system," said Ilma Levine, who, with Deborah Levin, played games and built models to expose the children of Central Elementary School to science in the late 1960s.

ADVERTISEMENT "We had a room where kids could come in their spare time, before school, after school and during lunch and kind of mess around with gadgets and science stuff," she said. "We even had little animals for them to play with."

Levine and Levin made science fun for students at Central School and other schools in the Ithaca City School District for more than 15 years.

The hands-on science program grew so popular in the district that the women, who were scientists by trade, began traveling to other schools to share the experience.

What modestly emerged from the passion of two enthusiasts who wanted to share science with young people has blossomed into the nationally renowned, community-built Sciencenter, where more than 90,000 visitors discover and rediscover science every year.

The Sciencenter celebrates the 25th anniversary of its incorporation as a not-for-profit on Thursday, but the birth of the Sciencenter occurred much earlier.

"We've come a long way," said Levin of the center's beginning at Central. "It was very, very popular with the kids and the parents and we decided maybe expanding the experience to the general public would be an interesting experiment."

The two colleagues got the inspiration to venture into a museum model after visiting a small science center in Syracuse.

"We looked at it and came out and said we could do that," Deborah Levin said in a lighthearted whisper.

After meetings with friends and then the public to see what interest existed in the community to accomplish the goal, Levine and Levin moved forward with their newfound coalition to expand their science-sharing project.

The then-titled Science Discovery Center of Tompkins County officially became a not-for-profit organization on Feb. 28, 1983, a decade and a half after Levine and Levin began their work in Ithaca schools.

But before the organization could move into a new location off school grounds, the school district community expressed its appreciation.

"When we announced that we were leaving Central School they had farewell party for us and it was a real tearjerker," said Ilma Levine. "They presented us with a paper grocery bag full of nickels and dimes and pennies and quarters."

Ithaca students were responsible for the Sciencenter's first big donation, \$280 in coins.

"That was our seed money for the Sciencenter," said Levin, smiling.

The nomadic years

Buy this photo

Zoom Photo



ERICA THUM / Journal Staff

Deborah Levin, left, and Ilma Levine are former Ithaca City School District volunteers who got the idea to create the Sciencenter after traveling around with props and lab equipment giving hands-on science lessons. They organized people and raised money to open the community-built Sciencenter. This year is the Sciencenter's 25th anniversary. In the background Blake Terry, left, and his twin, Liam take a virtual trip to the moon Tuesday, Feb. 12 on the Starry Night machine at the Sciencenter.

Anniversary Gala information

The Sciencenter plans to celebrate its 25th anniversary with a gala from 7-10 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 28 at the Sciencenter, 601 First St., Ithaca.

The event will feature live music, food, local beverages and reflections on 25 years of the Sciencenter.

Tickets for the gala, which is a formal attire event, can be purchased by calling the Sciencenter at 272-0600, ext. 18, or by completing the ticket order form on the Sciencenter's Web site, www.sciencenter.org/gala.

Individual tickets are \$50 each; blocks of 10 tickets are \$450. Limited tickets will be available at the door. The center will take contributions of any amount and contributors will be entered to win a New England travel package.

All proceeds will benefit the Sciencenter's endowment.

File downloads:

- [Sciencenter timeline](#)
- [A History of the Sciencenter](#)

Zoom Photo



Journal File Photo

Josephine Morales studies an Atlantic sturgeon at the Sciencenter's Cold-Blooded Carnival in 1989.

Deborah Levin describes the center's early years as "nomadic."

The Sciencenter resided in three different donated spaces between 1984 and 1989, including Center Ithaca.

In that time, the community's interest in the organization and number of visitors to the center had increased impressively and so had the number of displays and models the center owned. But at the same time, the donated spaces had gotten smaller while the number of models and displays had increased alongside the public's enthusiasm.

The center needed a permanent home.

"We either had to quit or enlarge," Ilma Levine said.

Just as the center had reached a critical do or die moment, the organization received a reality-changing donation.

Sciencenter board member Bruce Thompson and his business partner Art Kuckes gave the organization \$50,000 in 1990. The donation took the organization from an annual budget of \$1,000 primarily for utilities to having a true pot of resources.

"It was at the time when we realized we needed a permanent home rather than existing in donated spaces," said Thompson, who was a member of the Sciencenter's board of directors from 1985 to 2005. "And we needed money for that to happen and I felt that our company was in a position to help make that happen and fortunately my partner agreed as well."

The donation allowed the organization to hire an executive director, secure a small place for the not-for-profit to fundraise and develop a strategy for its future and put a down payment on the piece of land on which the current facility is located.

The organization shut down for nearly three years and spent the time developing its long-term strategy, which a good bit of the work would be done by the newly hired Charles Trautmann, the center's executive director.

Trautmann said he was eager to work with the budding museum.

"I love three things in life," Trautmann said. "I like kids, science and building things. And this was an opportunity to put all three of those things together, so for me it was my dream opportunity really."

Trautmann started in fall 1990 pursuing a plan for the construction of a \$2.5 million, 16,000-square-foot building built by the community.

"It didn't take us but six months to realize that this was not very realistic," he said. "We decided to downsize the project and do only one third of that and do it in phases, and that allowed us to get going ... sooner, because it was smaller."

Starting small helped the center's leadership avoid big mistakes and plan better for each subsequent phase of construction, Trautmann said.

Construction for the first phase of the Sciencenter's First Street location began in August 1992. But before the hammers were raised, nerves among the organizers were still jittery.

One night after a planning session in the office of architect Bob Leathers, the magnitude of the organization's venture began to settle in.

"We all went home that night absolutely terrified," Ilma Levine said. "Because we had no idea what we were getting into and we were just working off hope."

"I lost sleep over it," said Deborah Levin.

Despite their fears, construction began without a hitch.

"We had 2,200 people working for 10 months on this building," Trautmann said. "Hammer in hand, raising the roof, doing all sorts of things that volunteers have no business doing."

"We had two basic categories of volunteers," Levin said. "Those who could use power tools and those who couldn't. And we weren't wearing power tools," she said referring to herself and Levine.

Buy this photo

Zoom Photo



ERICA THUM / Journal Staff

Blake Terry, left, and his twin, Liam take a virtual trip to the moon on the Starry Night machine at the Mars and Stars Exhibition on Tuesday, Feb. 12 at the Sciencenter in Ithaca.

Buy this photo

Zoom Photo



ERICA THUM / Journal Staff

Debbie Levin, left, and Ilma Levine organized people and raised money to build the world's first community-built Sciencenter.



Zoom Photo

The Sciencenter celebrated its grand opening in May 1993.

Building accomplishments

Since then it has been one accomplishment after another for the museum. In 1996 the Sciencenter activities building was renovated, in 2002 an expansion that tripled the center's space was completed and in 2007 the center kicked-off a 10-year sustainability initiative to be a leader in environmental responsibility.

Between 1993 and 2007, the number of visitors to the Sciencenter has increased from 55,000 to 90,000. The Sciencenter helps reach another 1.5 million people through its traveling exhibitions.

"We have other museums bringing their traveling exhibitions to us to market for them," Trautmann said. "In other words, we've become a traveling exhibition service for the smaller museums of the country. And we're now touring 13 traveling exhibitions, and we're reaching over a million and a half visitors a year outside of Ithaca."

Levine and Levin are both astonished by what their humble science-sharing effort in the basement of Central Elementary School has become.

"We didn't envision anything this big or for it to have as much of an impact on the community as it has had when we started," Levin said.

The co-founders of the Sciencenter attribute the museum's success to the Ithaca community.

"The sense of ownership that the community has I think really plays a large part in our success," Levine said.

The center will focus on programmatic enhancements for the near future, Trautmann said.

Reaching as many children as possible, developing more involved programming for teenagers and becoming more of a support system for elementary instructors teaching science are all goals of the center for the coming months and years.

The founders are happy to see the community and country experiencing science because of the Sciencenter.

"Often people ask me, ... 'aren't you proud,'" Deborah Levin said. "Pride is not the right word. I'm delighted, but I didn't do it alone, and there's so many people that helped. I think it's wonderful. We were just so stubborn. We wouldn't leave it alone."

Despite all the learning going on thanks to the Sciencenter, its organizers refute the label teachers.

"We're in the business of inspiration," Trautmann said. "We don't teach science. That's not our goal. Our job here is to inspire kids to be interested in science."

cbsanders@ithacajournal.com

Originally published February 23, 2008

STORYCHAT 

[Post a Comment](#)

This article does not have any comments associated with it

 Print this article  Email this to a friend  Subscribe Now



[Contact Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Place an ad](#)
Copyright ©2008 The Ithaca Journal.
All rights reserved.

Users of this site agree to the
[Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Rights](#)
(Terms updated March 2007)

