

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

By Bob Silberman



The recent Reach Advisors—ASTC survey of science museum audiences found that men over 60 are a small but enthusiastic and committed group of museum users. (See the sidebar on page 6.) In this personal narrative, adapted from an interview conducted as part of the Institute of Museum and Library Services–funded Volunteers TryScience (VolTS) project at the New York Hall of Science, Queens, a volunteer tells of his dedication to his local science museum.

I began volunteering at the Sciencenter in Ithaca, New York, eight years ago, after having taught chemistry for almost 40 years in a local university. I originally got involved with the Sciencenter during my last sabbatical, when I had the opportunity to volunteer for a semester as their chemistry resident. I had such an interesting time that I continued on as a volunteer after I retired. Woodworking has been a hobby of mine for quite a number of years, and I've had the opportunity to help build over 25 interactive science exhibits. I have also had the chance to use my expertise and lifelong interest in chemistry to develop a number of chemistry-related, interactive floor activities. As part of this work, I mentor a group of local high school students with whom I developed a popular chemistry demonstration show, called *Chemsations*, which we put on regularly at the Sciencenter.

Ithaca is an academically oriented community that has several excellent colleges and a university. The Sciencenter welcomes and benefits greatly from volunteers who have retired from academia and donate their time. I spend perhaps 20 to 30 hours a week at the center. The staff encourages volunteers and values them, and volunteers usually have the chance to work at something that utilizes their expertise. We're a small place that has a family-like atmosphere. Everybody

knows your name, everybody knows something about you, and everybody knows what you're interested in doing.

Our science center is committed to making science accessible and fun for visitors, and the people who volunteer there are very much attuned to this. I think that science centers are valuable because they allow people to experience the excitement of science. Science centers are important assets to the communities they serve, and the Ithaca community supports ours very well. I see that many people who enjoy the museum really get involved. They keep coming back. My wife, June, volunteers in the Sciencenter's early childhood center, where she has gotten to know visitors well who have returned with children or grandchildren again and again.

Volunteering at the Sciencenter has been a very positive experience for me. My wife said, "You didn't retire; you just changed jobs," and she's right. I always liked teaching and I always liked involving people with science. I can do both at the Sciencenter without the activities that I didn't like as a teacher, such as grading papers and dealing with administrative obligations. So to me, it's the ideal retirement activity. ■

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