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Family night brings science to life

By **Stephanie Bertholdo** bertholdo@theacorn.com

White Oak Elementary School families recently got a taste—and smell and touch—of what the Discovery Center, a science and technology education "museum without walls," has in store for the future.

The center hosts family nights every month in school districts throughout the Conejo Valley, Moorpark, Simi Valley and Camarillo, said Dr. Linda Organ, one of the center's founders and the director of education.

White Oak Elementary in Westlake Village was chosen by Discovery Center leaders to host an event on Sept. 25 as a thank-you to the city of Westlake Village for their continued financial support of the center and its programs, Organ said.

"Each year they say yes," Organ said of the city's generosity to the Discovery Center. Over the last four years, the city has granted the center \$7,000, she said.

Families learned about motion, air, senses, amazing animals, gravity and chemistry through hands-on experiments and projects.

Families learned how a cat's tongue cleans its fur, how scientists determine the age of a fish and how camels can live in the desert without drinking water for weeks.

Motion lessons, including gravity, momentum and inertia, were taught with pendulums, balance toys and other easy-to-understand devices.

"I thought it was amazing," said Solomon Margo, a third-grader at the school. "My favorite was the Bend the Straw (project), where we had to blow so the ball kept floating on top of the straw," he said.

Solomon's brother Jax, a firstgrade student at White Oak, said he liked touching the "gak," a Silly Putty-like substance made from glue or cornstarch, and the way it melted in his hands. "I also got to touch the earthworms," Jax said.

Organ said about 300 families participated in the event, which was organized by the Discovery Center Teens, a group of middle and high school students who are fascinated by all things scientific.

"The goal is to inspire kids to love learning science," Organ said. "It works both ways for young kids and the teens. The (teens) run the experiments, talk with the kids, really get down with the kids."

Teens were not the only ones to teach children a thing or two about science. Organ said people from all segments of the community, including scientists, business owners, educators and others, help children learn at the monthly events.

Children also learned whether air actually takes up space and has weight. In the senses category, they "saw sounds" and experienced "mystery smells." Mystery powders were also explored as an example of chemistry.

The Discovery Center's programs have grown over the past 14 years despite the lack of a permanent home, Organ said.

"We are working on a Discovery Center project every day," Organ said. "We've been doing work with children as a museum without walls for 12 years and have now serviced more than 137,000 kids of all ages through our volunteer effort."



BUILDING MOMENTUM—Discovery Center volunteers Ted Hermesen, left, and Meagan Hanson, right, help Gavyn, 6, and Ava Gossage, 3, learn about motion through hands-on activity at White Oak Elementary School's Family Science Night. White Oak is in the Las Virgenes Unified School District.

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Reading, astronomy, more Other programs include RAYS (Reading Awakens Young Scientists), which takes "great children's literature and uses it as a springboard to help kids learn science," Organ said. She emphasized that the books chosen are not science books but "just great stories."

Storytellers are trained to act out the story without reading. "There's no face in a book," Organ said. "They're very effervescent storytellers."

Book illustrations are blown up to poster size so children can experience the literature at its fullest, she said. "The kids are very mesmerized by this; they are pulled right into the story," Organ said.

The program helps children make a connection from the story to "exciting, hands-on science," Organ said. For instance, in the book "Music Over Manhattan," children learn about how vibration makes music.

"Once they understand it, they create an instrument (out of recyclable materials) that vibrates," Organ explained. The program is followed by a visit from a musician, oftentimes a tuba player.

"(The children) go out, and for their grand finale they get to play music with the tuba players," Organ said. "The tuba is so big—and vibrates like crazy. They can really feel what vibration is."

The beauty of the program, Organ said, is found in its simplicity. "It's not only fabulous for kids to think like scientists, but it's a great model for teachers to integrate literature and science." She added that all of the center's outreach programs are standards-based.

Other programs include "Science Theatre," which brings experts to the Civic Arts Plaza to science to life. The portable planetarium, Starlab, is also a kid-pleaser.

"It looks like an igloo made out of a blimp and holds 30 kids," Organ said.

Family Science Night was a hit with the entire Margo family, who reside in Westlake Village. "It was just really refreshing to be exposed to science in such an exciting and educational way," said Solomon and Jax's mother, Laura Margo.