

The science behind business: Crowd turns out for hands-on activities

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SOUTH BEND -- Brooklyn Eslick, age 6, learned Sunday she is 140 centimeters tall -- or 1,140,000,000 nanometers.

Brooklyn and her sister, Jessica, age 9, of New Carlisle, got an introduction to nanotechnology Sunday during "How Does It Work?", a free event at Union Station designed to introduce area residents to the science behind area businesses.

The event was hosted by Michiana Science & Technology Center Inc., a new non-profit organization that encourages interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and shows how those fields are integrated in jobs throughout this region.

The two-day event made Union Station one of the busiest spots in downtown South Bend this weekend. And, best of all for budding young scientists, there were no "Do Not Touch" signs.

The event included about 20 booths, each offering hands-on activities manned by representatives from area businesses, colleges and non-profit organizations.

South Bend resident Erika Ruiz, age 7, used LEGO interlocking plastic bricks to construct a scale-model house. "I want to make mine really tall," she said.

Salvador and Leonor Moya, of South Bend, took their 5-year-old son, Apolonio, to the event. The little boy was captivated by the LEGO station and other hands-on activities.

"His mother and I both love science. We're always trying to encourage it," Salvador Moya said. "I think this is a great idea," he said of the gathering.

Alan Lang, manager of test engineering at Honeywell, showed visitors how to use a computer to track the level of energy on a bicycle wheel in motion, and how to measure the thermal energy by temperature as a brake is applied. The faster a volunteer turned the wheel of the bike, the higher the energy chart reached.

"It takes engineers, and math and science, to figure out how to make a plane stop," Lang explained.

Visitors also could handle a Honeywell-built brake for an Airbus A380, the world's largest passenger airliner.

"This really helps kids connect with math and science," Lang said. "Sometimes when they're sitting in a classroom, math and science don't really seem very fun. This give them an opportunity to see how it applies to jobs in our area."

Indiana University South Bend chemistry professor Doug McMillen showed visitors how to analyze the absorptive properties of a simple diaper. He had volunteers separate the cotton padding and the polymer from a disposable diaper, then add a gram of green-tinted water to each. The handful of cotton absorbed about 15 grams of water, but the much tinier polymer absorbed much more -- about 100 grams of water.

Michiana Science & Technology Center Inc. was established a few months ago. Greg Jones, the center's president, said the center will serve residents in seven counties in northern Indiana and southwestern Michigan.

The goal is to eventual create a permanent science education center in Ivy Tower, the massive old Studebaker assembly building just south of the railroad tracks near Coveleski Stadium. Kevin Smith, owner of Union Station Technology Center, plans to transform that building into a huge high-tech data center.

"We want to appeal to all age groups," Jones said. Just like this weekend's event at Union Station, the center will offer hands-on activities for people to learn about science, math and related fields, and how they relate to careers at businesses in this region, he said.

Michiana Science & Technology Center Inc. is seeking more individuals, organizations, schools and businesses to get involved in its efforts. There will be an informational meeting for anyone interested at 6 p.m. Jan. 24 at the Leighton Center, 524 N. Michigan St. For more information, visit: mstci.wikispaces.com.

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