

SPRING 2023

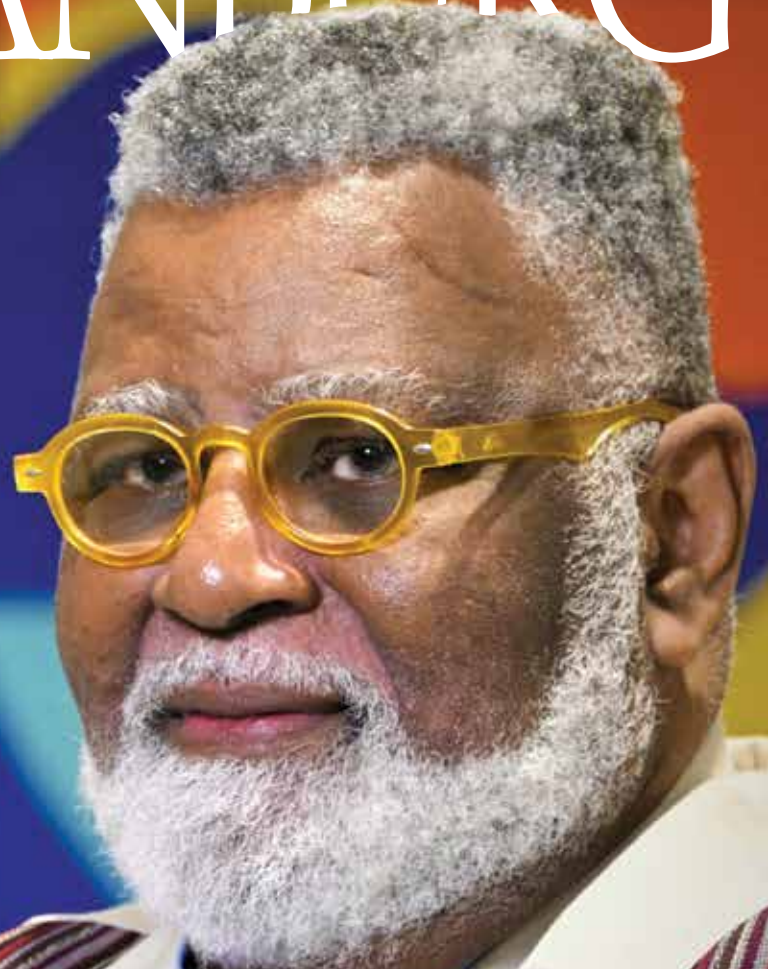
SPARTANBURG

ALEXANDER SMALLS

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has a lot on his plate

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SPARTANBURG SCIENCE CENTER

'You can just feel the learning'

STEM Programming engages kids and adults with plenty to see and do and enjoy

CHUCK MILTEER, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

It's a lot in just three rooms.

Go to the end of the second-floor hallway of the Montgomery building at the Chapman Cultural Center and there it is – the John F. Green Spartanburg Science Center.

If you're 5 to 65, pay your \$5 and step through the doors into a jam-packed experience for anyone who loves any kind of science.

Look left and you'll see Teak the Tegu in his two-level lizard lair, just outside the animal room, home of snakes and turtles, bearded dragons and other critters.

Look right and it's the fossil room, with its artifacts and skeletons, a natural history museum in miniature, complete with an elephant skull that stretches more than 9 feet across.

Go straight and try out interactive displays on electric power, physics and robotics.

It's a lot more than just three rooms.

Science Center instructors lead more than 500 educational programs that serve more than 20,000 students at schools in Spartanburg County and Cherokee County, most of them from after-school Kids Clubs (formerly known as Boys and Girls Clubs) at 18 schools.

Over at the Spartanburg Downtown Airport, high-school age students are learning about all aspects of aviation, hands-on and even in-flight. And in a combination classroom and virtual studio, podcasts and video lessons are



being recorded, followed by eager 4- to 6-year-olds doing interactive activities and experiments.

When there's activity in each space, it's a beautiful thing, says Science Center Executive director Mary Levens. Beau-



tiful, even as it's sometimes a bit raucous.

"Learning is loud," says Levens, who joined the Science Center after a 43-year teaching career. "You've got to be in touch with what the kids are doing, and they have to not be afraid to ask a question."

MR. GREEN'S LEGACY

The Science Center's is celebrating its 45th year in 2023. Its origin can be traced directly to Green, the founder and longtime executive director of the science center, from its founding in 1978 until his retirement in 2016.

For decades of Spartanburg students, the identity of the Science Center was almost indistinguishable from Green's.

He would visit students at school, bringing snakes and lizards and other items from the Science Center's collections. Students were delighted and learned and made long-lasting memories.

But when they got home, the conversation was often more about the experience than what organization provided it.

Same thing with many years of science-themed summer



At left, Teak the Tegu gets some love from a visitor. The South American lizard is said to be the smartest of all lizards; A popular exhibit lets visitors compare electric power consumption of everyday appliances and devices; Above, A robotics exhibit gives kids a chance to maneuver a mechanical arm; Double-headed snake was one of the first animals in the Science Center's menagerie of over 40 reptiles and other creatures. JOHN GALLANT/PROVIDED



camp, which were often more associated with Green than the organization he created.

"A lot of parents say they didn't know Spartanburg had a science center, but we've been here for more than 40 years," Levens says. "The kids knew, because John went into the schools. But parents didn't. 'Mr. Green came today' doesn't say 'Spartanburg has a Science Center.'"

Levens and her small staff are working hard to raise visibility for the Science Center as an organization.

SNAKES AROUND THEIR NECKS

Levens hires temporary instructors, usually teachers, for many of the center's 22 half-day, week-long summer camps and to provide Kids Club educational programs

Paid staff is two retirees who work part-time and one other employee, along with Wofford Bonner scholars majoring in physics, biology and environmental sciences.

The scholars volunteer 10 hours a week as part of the Bonner program, but most work additional hours, for which they are paid.

Bonner scholar Mae Webster's first volunteer posting as a first-year student was at an office, where her duties involved little more than filing, Levens said.

"She came to me and said, 'would you take me if Bonner will let me switch?' I said 'certainly!' Bonner let her switch and she's been with me ever since. Now, she totally runs the animal room."

Webster is a senior this year and will graduate out of the



Bonner program.

"I'm going to try to hire her," Levens said.

Levens says having so many young, smart people around keeps her on her toes. "They want to go and try things; they want to rearrange things. I'll tell them, 'Go try



it.”

During the height of the pandemic, Wofford students were mostly stuck in their dorm rooms, attending remote classes on their computers.

Levens said that the Bonner Scholars asked if they could come to the center and take their classes among the animals -- socially distanced and spread out across the otherwise-closed center. It was beneficial for both students and animals.

“We’d noticed that some of the animals were acting funny. It was because they were used to being handled, they were used to the noise and it was deathly quiet. So I had college students, one in there, one over there and they’d have snakes around their shoulders,” Levens said. “I’m sure some professors got interesting views when they clicked on and a student was in class with a snake around their neck.”

PANDEMIC EXPANSION, INNOVATION

Levens said that like many organizations, the lack of revenue from visitors and canceled in-school programs during the pandemic made things “a little dicey.”

Left, Rosie the tortoise is a popular resident of the Animal Room. JOHN GALLANT; Wofford College student Mae Webster manages the center’s Animal Room. She is a Bonner Scholar and a senior environmental sciences major. JOHN GALLANT; Above, John F. Green founded and was executive director of the Science Center for nearly four decades. Now, the Science Center is named for him. PROVIDED; The Center’s middle exhibit space is jam packed with interactive technology and physics displays. JOHN GALLANT



AVIATION PROGRAM LETS HIGH SCHOOL-AGE STUDENTS TAKE FLIGHT

CHUCK MILTEER, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Mary Levens said that soon after she was named Executive Director of the Spartanburg Science Center, she was looking for a way for the Science Center to engage more with high school-age students.

She thought that one way might be adding some sort of flight simulator to the Chapman Cultural Center facility.

Terry Connorton, director of the Spartanburg Regional Airport, was looking for a way to increase interest in careers in aviation. The airport has a flight simulator, but seldom had younger students wanting to use it.

He had also had a half-dozen willing instructors from different areas of the field, but was looking for equally willing students.

Now, collaboration between the science center and the airport has resulted in the Spartanburg Community Aviation Program.

Three times a year, a group of six students, 16-20 years old, take an eight-session course that provides ex-

perience in a broad range of aviation topics. Everything from basic aircraft mechanics and servicing to FAA and TSA safety principles and practices, to airport design and construction, to experiencing flight in both powered and glider aircraft.

The instructors volunteer their time. Many have become mentors to graduates of the program, several of whom have gotten their pilots' licenses, attended aviation schools like Embry-Riddle or pursued studies in aeronautical engineering.

The cost is of the program underwritten by grants, though students must commit to attending all the classes, which take place on two months of consecutive Sunday afternoons.

Selection is determined solely by an essay, in which the student must explain why they want to be part of the program.

"I contact the schools and let them know we're looking for students. 'You don't want any test scores? You don't want a grade point average?'

I say 'no, all I want to know is why they want to do it in a 250-word essay,'" Levens says. "That's all I want because, you would not believe ... they're not the same person at the end."

Levens said that there have been 10 classes, 60 students in all, during the three years the program has been operating, kids from many different backgrounds with very different interests.

"I had one student say that 'I live in the same town as these five other people, and we never would have met if I hadn't done this.'"

Levens said that she would like to do a similar program related to auto racing. She's just looking for the right partner.

The Aviation Program is offered as a joint venture of the Spartanburg Science Center and Spartanburg Downtown Airport. Among the experiences and lessons for students in the eight-week program is flying, both in a powered aircraft and in a glider. PROVIDED



And while the other organizations in the Chapman Cultural Center could close their doors and work from home, “we couldn’t shut down. We’ve got 40 animals that needed to be fed,” she said.

Instead of hunkering down, hoping to survive, the Science Center expanded its footprint and pivoted its programming to pandemic-friendly activities.

The center put on socially distanced outdoor movies in Barnet Park and teamed with Spartanburg Area Conservancy on a scavenger hunt for items found outside. Packs were picked up and dropped off, drive-through style, with gloved and masked volunteers tossing them into cars.

One particularly poignant pandemic activity was distributing bags with disposable cameras – each with 27 frames of film inside – for children, ages 3-12, to document Spartanburg during Covid.

Levens said her staff initially prepared 175 bags but ended up distributing more than 320.

“It was a whole new experience for the kids – the disposable cameras. The biggest comment (from adults) was ‘I didn’t know they still made these things.’ The kids were ‘I took a picture, where is it? I want to look at it.’”

But they got the hang of it and more than 270 of the cameras were returned. The film was developed and digitized by Spartanburg Photo, with backing by sponsors like the Spartanburg County Foundation and USC-Upstate.

“We assembled a team of professional photographers who went through and selected 33 that they thought were really good,” Levens said.

The curated photos were enlarged, mounted put on display outside the center, turning a hallway into an impromptu gallery.

NEW SPACES, NEW PROGRAMS

Expansion of the center’s footprint at the Chapman Center included absorbing an under-used conference room

next door. The renamed Milliken Learning Space offers additional room for meetings, classes, and camps. A grant from the company covers the additional rent.

At one end of the room, a one-eighth scale sculpture of a North Atlantic Right Whale is suspended from the ceiling. A shelf displays a model of a Saturn V rocket, made of Legos. It’s an homage to Milliken, which produces the color pigments that are used in Lego bricks worldwide.

A room at the opposite end of the building became the CONTEC Media Center last spring.

Levens pitched the idea to CONTEC Inc. CEO Jack McBride, who agreed to underwrite it. AFL in Duncan, a frequent science center partner, provided some of the equipment for the room, which serves as a studio for podcasting and recording video as well as being additional space for programs like a “Step into STEM” program for 4, 5 and 6-year-olds, which was developed by Webster as her Bonner program senior project.

“We feel like we’ve got a lot more space for outreach now,” Levens said.

‘FEEL THE LEARNING’

Levens said that the spring and summer will bring plenty of activity, with the return of the First Lego League Jr. Robotics Expo and competition for teams of children ages 6-10 on March 18.

And this summer, the center will offer more than 20 weeklong, half-day camps.

Levens says that the camps are great fun for kids, ages 4-12 – and a bargain for families. The \$150 cost for 15 hours of STEM-related is “cheaper than a babysitter and way cheaper than a tutor.” Scholarships are also available to help with the cost.

“It’s kind of crazy here in the summer when we have so many kids in here doing things, but you can just feel the learning and the energy that’s taking place.”

Above, Executive director Mary Levens shows off a bearded dragon to CONTEC Ceo Jack McBride and the opening celebration of the center’s CONTEC Media Center. The CONTEC Media Center offers virtual studio space as well as room for the Step into STEM program for 4- to 6-year-olds. JOHN GALLANT/PROVIDED

scene



Science Center Family Fun Night

The Spartanburg Science Center's Family Fun Night was held at the Flock Shop on Jan. 30. Exhibits of artifacts and live animals kept kids entertained. Prizes, including a birthday party at the Science Center and summer camp certificates were awarded to lucky winners. The Science Center is celebrating its 45th year. The event was sponsored by CONTEC and The Flock Shop and presented by Spartanburg Gives.

JOHN GALLANT/PROVIDED

