



Kim Christensen photos

A set of teeth stained by smoking illustrates some of tobacco's harmful effects to 5-year-old Tlycia Cotton, her brother Jovon, 6, and other students at West University Elementary School during a recent Mad Science demonstration.

A scientific method to their madness

Mad Science has a formula for making learning fun

By **ARLENE NISSON LASSIN**
Chronicle correspondent

Mad scientists with names such as Mad Chad, Bionic Brett, Molly Molecule, Electric Elissa and DNAmY work diligently among bubbling potions, steamy fog and gooey slime. No, this is not taken from the latest Harry Potter book, it's part of the educational fun of Mad Science of Houston.

Owner and president Shari Penner Riesenfeld of Meyerland purchased the Mad Science Houston franchise from Ariel Schlein, founder of Montreal-based Mad Science, and has turned it into a booming educational business in eight years.

For her franchise's growth and success, as well as innovative programs, Riesenfeld won Franchise of the Year at Mad Science's annual convention in Montreal in July 2003. When she first purchased the franchise, there were seven Mad Science franchises worldwide. Now there are 187 franchises and Houston is second largest behind San Diego in terms of revenue and activity.

"I knew this was the perfect business to bring to our area, and that is why we have seen 20- to 30-percent growth each year we have been in business," Riesenfeld said.

"Right now we service 5,000 children in after-school science programs at 150 schools on a weekly basis, and average between 10 and 25 birthday parties a weekend. People have a natural reluctance for teaching hands-on science, especially if it is messy, but research proves that children internalize scientific information best with hands-on activities. So we provide the service, and kids are benefiting."

Just finishing a successful run of its "Yuckapalooza" show at Space Center Houston, where thousands more were exposed to the scientific fun through 439 interactive demonstrations that were performed every hour this past summer, Riesenfeld now is launching several important new programs aimed at the 40 different school districts within her franchise area, which includes Harris, Montgomery and Fort Bend counties.

She estimates that more than 1 million children in the area



Shari Penner Riesenfeld, owner of Mad Science Houston, says her business reaches 5,000 children in after-school science programs at 150 schools each week, and performs at between 10 and 25 birthday parties on weekends.

have been exposed to Mad Science in one form or another.

"One of the best things about our business is that we customize programs to meet the needs of whomever our customer is," Riesenfeld said. "We also go to them, rather than the customer having to come to us."

"With the new Science portion of the TAKS test becoming a promotion standard, we have developed a TAKS PAK, which is a series of workshops done in classrooms to meet the TAKS objectives and enhance the science curriculum. We are offering five-week overviews or a 10-week in-depth program."

So far, approximately 40 schools have signed on to beef up their science programs with the TAKS PAK, and others are booking customized labs conducted within school classrooms. Fees are usually paid by grant monies or Parent Teacher Organizations.

Mad Science of Houston is a member of the National Science Teachers Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Riesenfeld is also bringing a new after-school chess program to Houston called Schoolhouse

Chess, which teaches the game to students from beginners to advanced players.

"The game of chess teaches important critical-thinking skills to children, and they can start in the first grade," she said.

Another new program ties into the "Red Ribbon Week," which is the school districts' special week of anti-drug education. Titled "Be Tobacco Free," it is described as a high-energy demonstration for large groups of children in kindergarten through sixth grade. It includes a demonstration of a mechanical smoker that shows how much smoke is produced from a single cigarette, and giant arteries display tar obstruction.

The Mad Science Houston offers juggling programs for Girl and Boy Scout troops, science camps, birthday parties, demonstration booths at festivals and events, and school programs from pre-school through middle school.

Perhaps the programs' popularity among kids is due to the fact that each demonstration is equal parts magic show, entertainment and scientific information. Kids know there will be special effects such as erupting volcanoes, brewing potions or some other exciting display.

Herod Elementary third-grader Michael Scheinthal, 8, has been participating in Mad Science programs after school for the past three years. He enjoys it "because you learn a lot, and you get to take home cool stuff like slime and rockets."

His mother, Susan Scheinthal, sings the praises of the program as well.

"It is a wonderful way of supplementing the science programs in school," Scheinthal said. "Mad Science is great because they bring important scientific concepts down to a level kids can understand."

Riesenfeld couldn't agree more.

"Making science fun makes it less intimidating for people," Riesenfeld said. "Our programs spark the imagination and curiosity of children and instill a clearer understanding of what science is really about and how it affects the world around us."

For more information, visit Mad Science of Houston at www.madscience.org/houston.