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## Mad Science: Family educates and entertains kids with fire and slime and other scientific wonders

2005-04-01  
by [Lori Varosh](#)  
Journal Reporter

Take the rigors of scientific experiment. Add fire, flash, fun and puns, and you've turned serious learning into Mad Science.

Though brothers Sam Tarbox of Redmond and David Zern of Woodinville are a bit too clean-cut to be mistaken for maniacs making monsters in the basement, they can turn almost any scientific principal into a show that will delight ages 4-12.

Sam will turn a dry-cleaning bag into hot-air balloons, use air pressure to crush a soda bottle and invite audience volunteers to ride a hovercraft, among other antics, during Up, Up and Away, a Mad Science presentation Saturday, part of the Auburn Art Commission's Bravo! series.

The company presented in-school shows for Auburn fourth graders in February, says Lori Patrick, the city's cultural arts manager.

"The kids loved it," she says. "Now they're back for a public performance."

Mad Science will deal in the kinds of scientific principals that "you'd forget in high school because it was boring," Zern says. "We make it fun."

"Kids really dig it," adds the brothers' mom and co-owner, Madeleine Zern of Woodinville.

Shaking it up

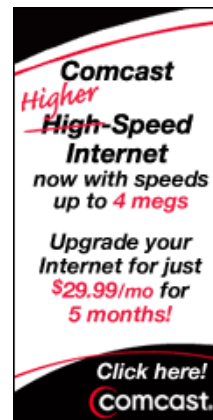
In their warehouse headquarters in the Overlake area of Redmond, the family perfects its repertoire, under the watchful gaze of a 7-month-old canine mascot known as Lennox "Lenny" Tarboxer.

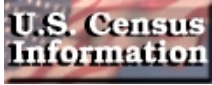
An ordinary roll of toilet paper and a plunger might turn into an airplane wing with the application of a leaf blower, illustrating how air blown across a curved surface creates a low pressure system. It's known as Bernoulli's Principal, Sam explains.

In another experiment, David holds a 5-gallon bottle containing a tiny amount of highly flammable liquid ethanol. "What happens if I shake it up?" he asks an imaginary audience. He shakes; it turns to a gas. Then, he applies a lighter. Whoof. The gas explodes into well-contained flame.

It was David who triggered the endeavor. While a senior at the University of California at San Diego, he got a part-time job that fit his student schedule: demonstrating Mad Science.

"This is such a cool job," he told Madeleine, a former engineer recruiter in the Silicon Valley. She was burned out with the corporate world, had survived a bout





with breast cancer and was contemplating opening a tea shop.

David talked her instead into contacting Montreal-based Mad Science. Two days later, the corporation called back. Mad Science of Seattle was going out of business. Was Madeleine interested?

"I decided it was something I'd enjoy," she says, but "it was very, very clear it was not something I could consider doing alone."

She convinced son Sam and wife Denise to give up his high-tech management job to participate. They purchased the King County franchise, one of more than 100 such franchises in North America, and moved north.

In April 2004 they opened Mad Science of King County. David, 23, graduated that June and joined in.

Today, they hire the college students, usually education or drama majors. "They have to be comfortable in front of 2, 3, 400 people," Madeleine says.

In all, 14 mad scientists are available to perform in white lab coats at three kinds of birthday parties, 40 different after-school programs (such as "Black & Blue Oceans," "Mineral Mania" or "Where's the Air") and at such benefits as the cancer walk at Redmond High School in May and such special events as the Fourth of July celebration at Bellevue Downtown Park.

In June, they will begin a series of summer camps (\$315 for five 7-hour days), as well as a "Dragon Who Came to Visit" show, which will tour King County libraries.

"We start every birthday party and special event with a magic trick," Sam says, "then explain the difference between magic and science."

There are courses in rocket-building, dinosaurs, electricity and other topics. They might give kids a "dry-ice shower" or instructions for a simple "acids and bases" experiment to do at home.

Often, when kids return for a new show a year later, they'll cry "I remember Bernoulli's Principal" or "I remember sublimation," Madeleine says. "Children are little sponges. They're learning without realizing they're actually learning."

Though they custom-design events, using different parts of their wide repertoire, they don't create new experiments. The Montreal company has fully tested each activity, Madeleine explains.

"Our audience is kids," she says. "We have to be sure everything we're doing, everything we're using is safe."

MAD SCIENCE: UP, UP AND AWAY

\* 2 p.m. Saturday

\* Auburn Riverside Theatre, 501 Oravetz Road, Auburn

\* \$5 from Auburn Parks and Recreation, 253-931-3043

\* 425-556-0800

\* <http://www.madscience.org/kingcounty/>

ALSO FOR KIDS

"Some fans bring lighters to concerts," says the New York Times. Laurie Berkner's fans "bring stuffed animals and put them on their heads."

With catchy pop tunes about fish on bicycles and other funky themes, Berkner's



music is a hit with children and parents.

She will be at The Moore Theatre, 1932 Second Ave., Seattle, at 11 a.m. Saturday. Tickets are \$15-\$20 from <http://www.ticketmaster.com>. For more information, visit <http://www.themoore.com>.

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