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Mad Science brings lessons to parties, assemblies and special events

By KRISTIN SENTRY
REGISTER CORRESPONDENT

Jim Birkel said he's always remembered the way his high school physics teacher managed to make the classroom come alive.

"One time he came into the room, jumped up on the table and then into the air, and said 'gravity!'" Birkel said. "He was able to show us that we could learn a difficult subject but also have fun at the same time."

The enthusiasm and willingness to teach science from an entertaining, tangible perspective captivated Birkel and his classmates. Today, Birkel hopes to re-create a similar experience when he and his staff put on science programs for the new Des Moines-based business venture Mad Science of Central Iowa.

Last spring, Birkel bought into the Montreal-based international franchise designed to bring a well-structured, entertaining, alternative form of science education to central Iowa. Kids' birthday parties, school assemblies, and special programs and events are all fair game for Mad Science programs.

Geared to children ages 3 to 12, the program aims to help nurture a

love of science in young people — and have fun at the same time.

Birkel hails from a diverse background that blends corporate market research, collegiate-level economics teaching and an undergraduate degree in forestry. He said he knew that at some point in his career he wanted to work in his own business, and he learned about Mad Science through a franchise broker who thought it matched well with his background and interests.

"Science is neat, and the blending of science and our children is really the future," Birkel said. "I don't want kids to feel scared of science, and my hope is that each and every one can reach his potential with it."

Mad Science programs last from 45 minutes to two hours. They involve interactive experiments, opportunities for participants to make things, a ride on a hover craft and some nifty explosions — all presented with a dose of fun, safety and humor.

Johnston resident Vicki Selinger, PTO co-president at Beaver Creek Elementary School, recently hired Mad Science to perform at a student assembly and was pleased with the results.

"All the staff and students found it very enjoyable," Selinger said. "The kids were very eager to be a part of the presentations."

She said one experiment that blew toilet paper toward the ceiling and another that set teachers to the hopeless task of pulling apart a vacuum-locked sphere provided good comic relief and illustrated important scientific principles.

"It was well-presented and even coincided with our second-grade science units," she said.

Mad Science recently performed for patients and staff at Blank Children's Hospital and drew such an enthusiastic response that Birkel and staff have been invited to perform at the Blank Children's Hospital Festival of Trees next week.

"Jim has been great to work with, and we're very excited about what he does," said Jennifer Perry, public relations manager at the hospital. "We had such a wide range in ages in our audience, and everyone loved it."

While launching a new business endeavor is stressful, Birkel said the pleasure he feels in his new line of work has only enriched his life.

"My antacid consumption has decreased by 80 percent," he joked.

Mad Science of Central Iowa

FIND IT AT: 300 S.W. Fifth St., Des Moines; 283-8343.

ON THE WEB: www.madscience.org/centraliowa

WHAT: Entertaining and educational science programming for birthday parties, assemblies and special events. Geared to ages 3 to 12. Mad Science can travel to various locations and has several spaces available for programming.

EXPECT TO PAY: Prices start at \$119 for birthday parties and \$125 and up for school workshops but vary with the components in the presentation.



SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Jim Birkel started Mad Science of Central Iowa last spring to bring a well-structured, entertaining, alternative form of science education to children in the area.

"And on Sundays, when I think about going to work the next day, I just feel how beautiful it will be to get up and go.

"I really hope to help kids reach their potential with science without shying away from it," he said.