

Husband and wife find new careers bringing Mad Science to kids' parties, schools

BY RENEE OLMO

“Quantum Kris” is used to the attention he gets when he walks onto a campus. “The kids get so excited when they see the lab coat – it’s definitely the coat,” Kris Bersamina says humbly while preparing for his after-school enrichment program at Atlantic Shores Christian School.

“You definitely have to think on your feet to stay ahead of the kids. It’s fun and challenging and it’s pretty cool to watch the kids get excited about science. We offer an inquiry-based learning program, so each week we are building upon what we learned in the past,” he says smiling. “It’s definitely a unique opportunity for learning.”

Chief Mad Scientist and former active duty Naval Intelligence Officer, Heath Marcus and his wife, Jen, also known as “Helium Heath” and “Jupiter Jen” are striving to bring home the message that science is both cool and fun. Their new business, Mad Science of Hampton Roads, offers an exciting alternative for birthday parties, special events, school assemblies, enrichment programs and camps. The company serves all of Hampton Roads from the Peninsula to the Southside.

“We bring the party to you!” Jen says with a laugh. “What is cooler than having your own personal mad scientist? Our staff is fully trained to create and lead a variety of wacky and fun experiments geared toward the age and interests of the birthday child.”

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— Mom Doreen Lund

Doreen Lund of Chesapeake was excited to find Mad Science on the Internet.

“I had found Mad Science online, and thought it would be a great birthday party for my son because he loves science,” she recalls. “The party was great. I was surprised by the caliber of the equipment that they brought to our house. It was not rinky dink science equipment; it was top of the line stuff.”

Doreen admits to being a little nervous at first about the mess. “But they brought tarps for the slime experiment and my rugs were fine when it was all over,” she says with a smile.

“I would definitely say that the kids were all amazed by the experiments. Everyone was able to participate, so they were definitely busy for the entire party,” she adds. “The grand finale of the day was a ride on a hovercraft. Everyone waited patiently for their turn – it was definitely a hit!”

On a recent Saturday morning, the thrill of a Mad Scientist birthday party was evident as 18 junior scientists scrambled around the Great Bridge Community Center in celebration of James Roney, who was turning six. His mother, Roxana Roney, says that she wanted a

party that the kids could enjoy, but also loved the idea that they could learn something, too.

When “Kryptonite Kristin,” also known as Kristin Peterson, started James’s party, everyone was ready, complete with lab coats that Roxana had specially made to put everyone in the science mood. “Helium Heath” was also on hand to make sure that things went smoothly, including the dry ice finale.

While mobilized by the Navy Reserve and serving in Afghanistan in late 2006, Heath began to consider options beyond returning to his government civilian job, which he had held since leaving active duty in 2003. Always the entrepreneurs, the couple started looking for a business that was meaningful for both of them.

“We wanted something that we would care about and have a passion for,” Jen adds.

The Duke University college sweethearts are the parents of eight-year old twins, Sarah and Lindsay, and Jack, who’s almost three. “It always came back to a kid-centered business,” Heath recalls.

“Children are natural-born scientists and we loved the idea of starting a company that instills a passion for learning,” Jen continues. “Our business is to make science as fun and exciting as possible!”

“The idea for Mad Science originated in Canada, and we liked that the business was based on 20 years of scientific research and development. Our experiments and programs are backed by an educational format to instill a thrill of scientific learning,” Heath says.

“Jen is our marketer and I am the Chief Mad Scientist—it works for us,” Heath quips.

“We never imagined that we would work so well together, but it has been a dream come true for us,” Jen agrees.

Heath still serves as a Navy Reserve Officer. “The kids will sometimes ask me if I am leaving again, so this career change has been good for our family. My work hours have definitely improved,” he says with a smile.

NASA has also teamed with the energy of Mad Science in promoting imagination and scientific awareness in young children through a formal partnership to create the Academy of Future Space Explorers. The goal is to inspire the next generation of astronauts, physicists and engineers through cooperative learning programs. Mad Science facilitates NASA’s space-inspired themes to promote children’s curiosity about Earth, the Moon, Mars and beyond through hand-on experiments and demonstrations.

“We have a great team of enthusiastic Mad Scientists on board whose primary goal is to spread a sense of wonder in children,” Heath said proudly. “All of our Mad Science staff goes through specific training to follow the experiments, handle the equipment and spark imaginative learning!”

The standards are high for the Mad Scientists on board. When “Quantum Kris” first interviewed for Mad Science, he was surprised by the impromptu interview process given by Jen and Heath. “We had to do a fifteen



“Kryptonite Kristin” with a group of young Mad Scientists, complete with lab coats and studious-looking eyeglasses, at a recent birthday party. The kids had a great time with the experiments and a dry ice show.

minute presentation on how to do something – it was completely unexpected,” Kris recalls. “I felt like I was on American Idol! But it was a good experience. They want you to be able to think on your feet.”

John B. Dey Elementary School in Virginia Beach offers the premier NASA-approved Mad Science After-School Enrichment Program. Principal Lee Capwell has been impressed by the caliber and the professionalism of the Mad Science staff. “When you are offering a program after a long school day, you have to offer something that keeps the children engaged in a fun way. It has to grab the student’s attention,” Lee says knowingly. “Mad Science has done a great job of finding people who can relate to the kids, and make them look forward to learning something new.”

“Jen was incredible. The program is so well organized, they make it simple for us. They bring everything, they clean up, the kids go home with something and they are able to demonstrate that they have learned a new concept,” she said. “It’s a credible science program.”

“When we first decided to pilot this program, we decided to offer 50 spots. All 50 spots were filled, and I am sure that we could have filled more. At this point, it’s such a popular program, it’s highly likely that we will offer it again,” she added.

Mad Science also has specialized programs for in-house field trips. “We basically bring grade appropriate science experiments to the classroom. It’s a field trip without the hassle of buses or chaperones,” Jen says. “One of my favorite workshops is the Black and Blue Oceans. The kids love it. It’s a great mess, as we simulate a mock oil spill and then do experiments on how to clean-up the damage to the ocean. It’s a great way to motivate kids to think about pollution and the environment.”

Jen’s career experience in marketing and public relations for non-profit organizations also lends itself to special events for children through the Make A Wish Foundation and to host Hospital Happenings and Great Escapes with the Starlight Starbright Children’s Foundation. “The beauty of bringing science to any venue is that it can go anywhere, even to a hospital,” she adds with a smile.



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