



Truly innovative work occurs when ideas from one field find application in another.

News

Sitting in Newton's tree

Fair for grown-ups revives perplexed feeling of high school chemistry

|Joseph Wilson

"What's in this thing?" someone asks me at the Victory Café on a recent Saturday night. He's referring to a sealed container known as "the black box." We're trying to figure out the shape of the inside of the box by listening to a marble bounce off its walls. Welcome to the Grown-Up Science Fair.

The Treehouse Group, which I've been part of for a couple of years, puts on events like this. People from a diverse range of disciplines come together to brainstorm and exchange ideas. In an effort to combat the group-think that goes on in our offices, we want to encourage people to get out of their comfort zones. We're big believers that truly innovative work occurs when ideas from one field find a new application in another. Our relationship with science is difficult. On the one hand, we're all glued to our cellphones and have opinions on climate change, yet we've never really lost that perplexed feeling we had in high school chemistry.

We learned that Toronto's universities and research institutions were putting on a day of festivities dubbed Science Rendezvous devoted to celebrating the world-class research going on here. What better opportunity to begin a conversation about the importance of understanding science in our modern world?

We sent out a call for submissions, looking for science projects by people who aren't scientists who wanted to relive the glory days of their Grade 6 science fair.

On the evening, we get people who want to measure the blood alcohol level of the crowd with a breath-a-lyzer, and a woman who recreated a video she saw on YouTube of a glowing electrified pickle.

One enterprising couple brings a generator they made from the junk in their garage to power a small light bulb. Another entry tests the absorbency of different brands of beer mats. (The winner? Wellington Brewery.)

A vinegar/baking soda volcano is set off to great effect, and a girl who made flubber actually gives people Ziploc bags so they can take their goopy creations home.

But the star of the evening turns out to be the walnut project. Barbara Browne, from Simcoe, e-mailed me, "When I was a child on the farm, I would sit under the walnut tree and eat the green coverings on the nuts," she wrote. "I have already tested this science project... as I am now 90 years old and feel just fine."

Browne is unable to come down to the science fair herself but is ex-cited to participate. Her niece Charlotte arrives at the Victory Café to set up her project – a photo display, including shots of Barbara as a child, and drawings she'd made of herself eating walnuts with her dog, complete with yellow teeth from the walnut hulls.

As the evening draws to a close and the data points on the breathalyzer graph among participants drift up-ward,

we award Browne a trophy with a light bulb on top.

We're looking forward to what she'll do next year.

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