

Scientists interact with youngsters at Frost Museum's Scientist Sundays

BY DANIEL URIA - SOUTH FLORIDA NEWS SERVICE

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Matthew Echeverry, 8, plays a photo matching game where he learns about evolution and hybrid monkeys in Africa. Echeverry visited the Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science on Nov. 2 during the museum's "Scientist Sundays," an event that brings scientists from several Florida universities to the museum the first Sunday of every month through their Science Communication Fellows program. MATIAS J. OCNER / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

As Joshua Echeverry, 8, shook a bottle full of sand at a recent visit with his family at the Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science, he smiled as he counted the small plastic lizards hidden inside. Then, Joshua reported his findings to scientist Ashley Campbell, who was dressed in a lizard tail.

But while he enjoyed counting lizards and making proteins out of Legos, there was one other thing about the scientists that encouraged Echeverry to say he'd like to come back.

"I really find them nice," he said.

This is the type of reaction science curator Angela Colbert hoped for when she started Scientist Sundays, which brings scientists from several Florida universities to the museum the first Sunday of every month through their Science Communication Fellows program.

“People sometimes have misperceptions about scientists,” she said. “It’s nice to have them in an environment where they’re very approachable and real people, and get to know them, as well as what they do.”

The program encourages scientists to make their research more accessible and teaches them how to share it with the public.

“I learned to really watch what I say and not blow through stuff like endemism and biodiversity, stuff that I think everyone should know but obviously most people don’t,” said Campbell, a graduate student at Florida Atlantic University.

Part of the process is developing hands-on activities meant to display their research in a way that engages them face-to-face with guests of all ages during the Sunday events.

For example, Kate Detwiler, an assistant professor at Florida Atlantic University, had guests participate in a photo matching game to teach them about her research on hybrid monkeys in Africa

“You want to bring in the kid and engage them because they have the shortest attention span. But then in time, you find you’ve engaged the parent and then you sort of shift it to them,” she said. “I find that is almost the most rewarding part, when you can get the kid and the adult and the grandparent. I’ve had all three generations together at the table.”

The open platform and wide range of experience levels forces the scientists to get creative with their choice of presentation.

Michelle Larrea, an assistant professor at Nova Southeastern University, shared her research on proteins by using Legos, an idea that came from observing her own children.

“Proteins have shapes,” she said. “So how can I explain shapes to kids? And it was through them interacting with Legos that I thought well, ‘I can make proteins out of Legos.’”

By testing out these activities and interacting with the public, the scientists learn just as much about how to properly teach and share their research as the guests learn about science.

The experience helped Detwiler realize that her use of jargon in her lengthy lectures may have created a gap between her and her students. Participating in Scientist Sundays helped her learned to be more direct in getting to the point.

“Researchers aren’t taught to teach,” she said. “So this program has taught me to wait. It’s given me this whole new perspective of how people are understanding what I want to teach them.”

Twenty-two scientists from various Florida universities have gone through training with the science communication fellows program and participated in Scientist Sundays.

As the program grows, Colbert hopes to reach out and expand the pool of scientists and even have the program become a weekly event.

“One of the things we want is really the latest, the current and the best research that’s being done to share it with the public and to really be a resource for them where they’re getting it directly from the scientists,” she said.

IF YOU GO

- **What:** Scientist Sundays
- **Where:** Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science, 3280 S Miami Ave, Miami, FL 33133
- **Hours:** Next event is 1 to 3 p.m. on Dec. 7
- **Cost:** Free with museum admission
- **For more information,** call (305) 646-4200 or visit <http://www.miamisci.org> (<http://www.miamisci.org/>)

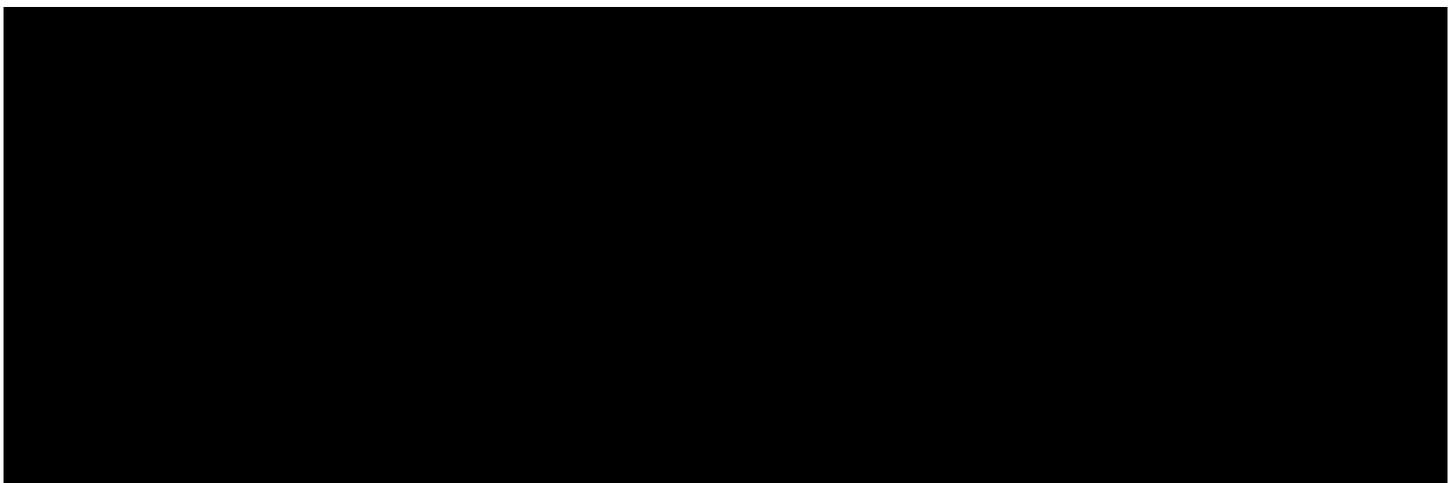
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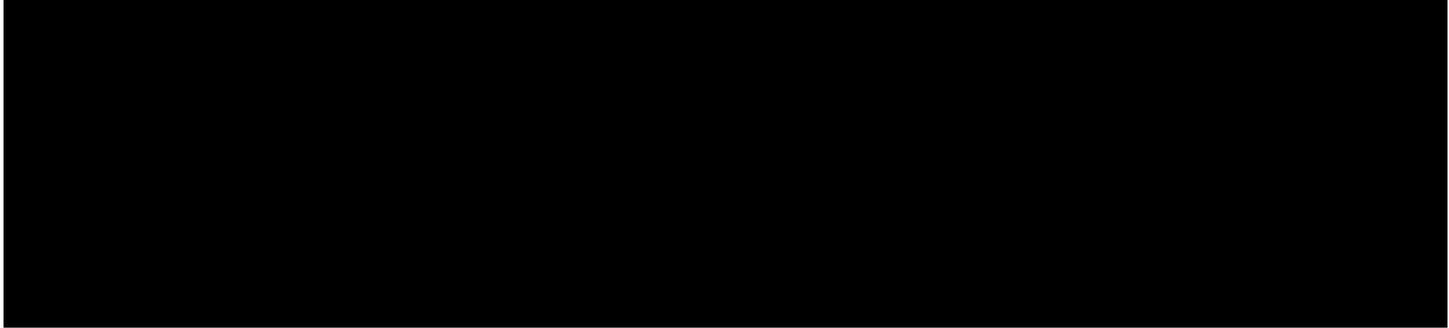


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