

StarTribune

Science Museum sleepover like 'Night at the Museum' meets 'Indiana Jones'

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Star Tribune

March 27, 2012 - 10:44 PM

As a teacher, Pam Schilling always is looking for ways to get kids interested in science.

"I want them to understand that science is important, that it is all around them in their lives," said Schilling, who teaches at Sky Oaks Elementary in Burnsville.

Recently, Schilling got a big assist in her quest from the Koch brothers, the well-known Republican financiers and businessmen.

Thanks to a grant from Flint Hills Resources, a Koch-owned refinery in Rosemount, more than 70 students and teachers from Sky Oaks not only got to visit the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul last week but also got to spend the night.

The Sky Oaks students were among more than 500 fourth- and fifth-graders from seven schools who participated in the mass sleepover, something the museum does several times a year courtesy of Flint.

The company provides more than \$100,000 a year for the program, which it sponsors in a variety of states around the country as a way to encourage interest in science.

"We see it as an investment in our future," said Jake Reint, a spokesman for Flint Hills.

The event is part "Indiana Jones" and part "A Night at the Museum," movies that many kids have already seen.

For many of the students, the campout was the first time they had been to the museum, considered one of the best in the country. It was also the first time many of the kids had spent the night away from home, according to teachers.

The students arrived midafternoon and had the run of the museum, looking at everything from the dinosaur skeletons to the biology cell lab.

"We made DNA," said Anna Larson, a fifth-grader at Sky Oaks and a veteran of both museum visits and sleepovers.

Teachers said the students do a variety of experiments in their classes, but having the resources of the Science Museum such as the computers, microscopes and displays adds quite a bit to the experiments.

One of the many discoveries that students and teachers made during their visit was that Anna's grandfather, Richard Daly, is part of one of the museum exhibits: as an inductee and member of the Minnesota Science and Technology Hall of Fame.

His granddaughter and a friend spent part of their time at the museum watching one of the interviews Daly recorded for the hall of fame.

A lot of prep work

Maia Leipold, another Sky Oaks fifth-grader, was making only her second visit to the museum.

"I've also never slept over in a building before," she said between experiments. "I think it's going to be a little scary."

Anticipating some nerves, teachers spent weeks preparing students for the overnight and the itinerary, which was meticulously plotted out by the museum staff.



At the Science Museum in St. Paul, Madison Rae Bowden of Sky Oaks Elementary in Burnsville got ready for bed. She spent the night with hundreds of other kids.

The program has been going on for nine years, and almost 15,000 kids from about 100 schools all over the state have participated.

The museum also sends staff to put on a science program for schools selected, even if a school is hundreds of miles away near the Canadian border.

"We love doing it," said Dan Raney, the museum's program director of lifelong learning. "These kids are part of a select group. We get about a million visitors a year. Not everybody gets to spend the night on the museum floor."

Raney said the museum tries to get to all parts of the state in selecting schools. He said that a lot of kids have never been to the museum before.

That was the case for Devon Jackson, a fifth-grader at Sky Oaks who likes science and likes to study bones and rocks.

"I think it's pretty cool," Devon said after his first pass through the museum Thursday afternoon. "I knew there were bones, but not the whole dinosaurs. I think it's going to be neat to spend the night."

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