

# Scintillating science

## Hands-on learning draws crowds to The Children's Museum

By Becky Radolf

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**WEST HARTFORD** — A class of fourth-graders became pilots, astronauts, and geologists all in one day, and they did it all before lunchtime.

Or, at least, they learned what it would be like at The Children's Museum, an institution that has been enchanting children since 1927 by making science and nature engaging and interactive.

A 60-foot sperm whale replica named Conny — whose innards can be traversed by those intrigued — greets visitors who drive up the entrance of the museum at 950 Trout Brook Drive and spouts water through its blowhole in the summer.

"We're supplementing a love of science



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Life-sized replicas are part of the dinosaur exhibit at The Children's Museum.

and nature," said Ira Morrison, the consulting marketing manager for the museum. "We make things hands-on and add to what the kids learn in school."

With the new exhibit, "Winging It! Adventures in Flight," visitors learn the laws of flight by playing the part of pilots, weather broadcasters, and flight engineers — for paper airplanes, that is.

Three virtual reality flight simulators built from scratch at the museum mimic what a pilot experiences as he navigates his way above the cityscape or nosedives into a mountain peak.

"I liked the planes a lot," said Michael Blanchard, 7, of Andover after experiencing the exhibit. "It's like you're playing a video game. It was awesome."

Funded by Hamilton Sundstrand, a division of Hartford's United Technologies Corp. "Winging It" also features a station where children can build their own paper airplanes and shoot them through a launch station that will rocket their creation with impressive speed.

"We try to create an opportunity to be hands-on with science," said Kevin Sullivan, president and CEO of the museum. "Everything we do enforces the statewide science standards."

The theme of air travel continues into the astronomic realm when visitors step inside the Travelers Science Dome, a digital planetarium that is the largest and only full-dome planetarium — others are half-dome — in New England.

The programs range from a half-hour adventure with Big Bird through the night sky to a tour with talking oxygen and hydrogen atoms to learn how they form molecules. But those with the intention of simply seeing starry skies in the dome are not out of luck.

"People still come and want a traditional planetarium show, and they can get that, too," said Kristie Mazzoni, planetarium director.

The program, "Oasis in Space," offers a tour of the solar system, and the dome can project an image of the night sky at the present moment or up to 10,000 years back. Each program also offers a question-and-answer session to ensure students understood what they saw.

In addition to the comprehensive space and flight programs, the museum also offers



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Drew Gallup, left, and his sons, Connor, 3, and Caden, 5, pan for gems at the mining exhibit at The Children's Museum.

several outstanding nature exhibits where children can meet all kinds of live animals or interact with replicas of them.

"It's nice because it's all so hands-on" said Karen Midolo of Andover, a chaperone for a kindergarten class from Andover

dinosaur that existed more than 70 million years ago — and even sit behind the wheel of a Jeep that would be used at excavation sites.

Based around rock discoveries in Connecticut, the exhibit teaches children about the mineral findings in the region

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Karen Midolo  
field trip chaperone

Elementary School that was visiting the museum this day.

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One of the most interactive animal exhibits is the "Excavation Station," where visitors can put on excavation jackets and uncover fossils in a dirt pit created by the museum. Those less inclined to dig can stare into the face of a life-size velociraptor — a

since the 1700s, and encourages them to play the part of budding geologists to dig up semi-precious stones and to look at their formations under a magnifying glass.

Yet, amongst the replica dinosaurs, a 45-foot pendulum that sways with the Earth's rotation, and a station where children can make soap bubbles as big as their heads, the live animals seem to capture a lot of the attention.