



Impression 5 Science Center

MICAELA BALZER AND
NIK MCPHERSON KNOW
HOW TO GET KIDS
EXCITED ABOUT SCIENCE

Photos and Story by Phil Eich,
Storyville Social, as part of the
Michigan Main Street Story
Series

"Impression 5 is a hands-on science center that provides STEM education for families, school groups, and people involved in our community. In 1972, Marilynne Eichinger created the center with the idea of teaching science in ways that could be experienced: touching, hearing, maybe even tasting! She wanted to create a place with a hands-on approach that made science come alive to connect people to science in a very unique and dynamic way.

That idea manifested into different types of hands-on activities—what we call exhibits—in which children could explore science concepts, being able to literally crawl inside something and experience it.

One exhibit is called Flow. It's our water exhibit—you can smell it when you come in. It's not quite chlorine, but the smell of a pool almost. There, you can rev up a big fly wheel and shoot water up to the second floor of the Science Center!

Another great favorite is Pop, our bubble room. There, you can put yourself in a full-body bubble or blow giant bubbles across the room.

A third favorite is Spectrum, our light room. It's completely dark except for the parts of the exhibit that light up in all sorts of different ways. There's a full light mosaic wall and light painting and that's where our big plasma ball is.

We also have our traveling exhibit area where we rotate exhibits several times a year. Right now, we have our 'How People Make Things' exhibit, but we've had all kinds of other great exhibits tied in with kids shows or activities.

We build all the other exhibits in the Science Center in-house and our fantastic exhibits team does a lot of awesome work: whether it's imagining things, working with community partners, or creating some fantastic exhibits. Roughly every 10 years, we look at each exhibit, reevaluate and make sure it's still living up to everything we hope it can be as we develop and innovate new exhibits."

—Micaela Balzer, Director of Innovation and Learning and Nik McPherson, Operations Coordinator with Impression 5 Science Center

"When we're designing new exhibits at the Impression 5 Science Center, we start with thinking about the user: Who is the child we're expecting to experience this? Where are their natural interests? What do they already know about science? What are they curious about?"

The next step is then thinking about the experiences we can create. What's tangible? What can be in their hands?

Beyond the concept of science, we really want kids to develop a positive relationship with science. We want students to feel challenged and successful in their thinking; we never want people to come into the Center and feel bored.

Science is a challenging subject when you think about all the unknowns and discoveries yet to be made, and we want people to feel that they are great at discovering new things. We're all naturally curiosity-based learners: children are especially great at this because they're not afraid and have no qualms about going up to something, touching it and playing with it.

With that in mind, we make sure that every corner of the Science Center speaks to a fun and innovative approach. If you need someone to pull something to have an experience, we make sure that what they need to pull is visibly right in front of them so when they walk in, they know intuitively to pull it and something will happen.

We want to create an environment where there are risks to be taken, of course. Learning is a risky environment, but we also want it to be accessible and safe in the way we cultivate questions and explore."

—Micaela Balzer, Director of Innovation and Learning, and Nik McPherson, Operations Coordinator, with Impression 5 Science Center



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"Impression 5 To Go is our gift shop. If you've been to our gift shop before, definitely come back and give it another look—we've probably doubled our footprint over the past year or two. Rick, our retail coordinator, has done an awesome job finding a lot of really great new toys, kits, games and all sorts of great things to help continue your STEM learning at home.

The gift shop also serves as a really great additional revenue generator for the Science Center, because we are a nonprofit, and it helps with continuing our mission of 'play, create and challenge' by bringing science to people. This lets them take that experience home and continue to learn and explore as well.

The Match on Main grant has been absolutely vital in moving Impression 5 To Go past the boundaries of the Science Center itself and bringing us online to expand our mission and stay connected with members of our community who are local or far away. People can now visit the gift shop online if they're not able to come to the Science Center or if it's 10 p.m. and they realize they need a gift for someone.

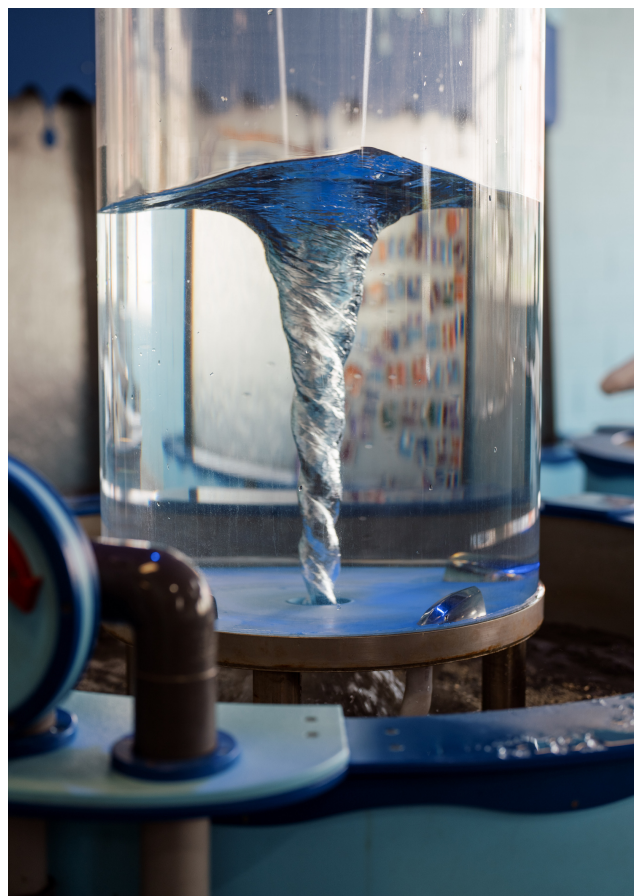
Impression 5 is about science, but it's also about people.

Nonprofit work can be very challenging. The pandemic has been hard on all of us, including a lot of nonprofits, but the people who work here are incredible. They come from such a variety of backgrounds and interest levels and they are here, ready to move science education forward.

Then, of course, there are the people who visit Impression 5 and are part of our community. We love seeing the personal connections that are built while also delivering science-related content, or when guests come in and say things like, 'I haven't been here in 35 years and I wanted to come back with my kids (or grandkids) because I loved this place when I was a kid.'

One of the best treasures is to connect with another human being and have science be the medium for that. It's just wonderful."

—Micaela Balzer, Director of Innovation and Learning, and Nik McPherson, Operations Coordinator, with Impression 5 Science Center





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