Confessions of a science clown

Description

In the weeks since Science Online 2012 ended, there has been a lot of discussion over different social media platforms about the experience, what could be done differently, the highs and lows and most importantly, what could be discussed next year.

Iâ€™ve made a lot of new friends since the conference, and have already started discussing topics for next year.

But, this post isnâ€™t going to be about that. This will be about something that was mentioned during the conference at the banquet.

At the banquet, a number of attendees got up and shared stories under the theme of â€œconnections,â€• and they were all fantastic.

One spoke about their career, another recounted a bizarre story involving pubic lice, and another told a personal story about their battle with depression. A fellow Canadian, however, spoke about teaching science to children and how it profoundly changed her perspective.

This tale of mine takes place a number of years ago, before I came to the decision to pursue my Masters of Journalism and was still set on becoming a professor of zoology, but I will refrain from mentioning the business by name.

When I was a kid and went to summer camp, every now and then, weâ€™d have a special activity where a â€œscientistâ€• (named so because he or she would be wearing a lab coat) would teach us something about science in a fun way. Weâ€™d learn about water pressure by making water rockets and about geometry by building bridges.

So, when I was looking for a part-time job, working for them seemed like a natural fit.

I applied, being ridiculously over-qualified, and I was quickly hired.

The first step was to be trained in their various experiments and how to explain them to children. Coming from science, I never once looked at the instruction booklet. I already knew the three pillars a fire needs, or why dry ice turns from solid to gas and did not need to re-learn it. In fact, I helped teach others why certain reactions or experiments worked, where the booklet did not explain it correctly (and there were more than a few instances of that).

The next step was creating a unique nickname that the kids could call you, such as Atomic Allison or Rocket Rose. Sadly, Dynamite David was taken, as was Dinosaur Dave.

So, I ended up being, after a process of elimination, â€œDynamo Dave.â€•
I cannot tell you how many times kids asked what a dynamo was.

Dynamo Dave in all his glory at a Halloween party (blood is fake, just fyi)

Very quickly, I was being sent out to childrenâ€™s birthday parties and running after-school activities. It was actually a lot of fun â€¦ at first.

However, there was no variation. You either did kit A, B or C. You could not vary and could not deviate from their approved lesson plans. But, whereâ€™s the fun in that, right?

So, I went Frankenstein on the lesson plans for birthday parties.

Taking the specifics that the parents ordered (such as rocketry, the take-home, cotton candy, etcâ€¦), I began to cobble together the most interesting and cool experiments that would entertain as well as educate.

Iâ€™d start off with a magic trick on the birthday boy or girl that always amazed. Following that, it was time for the cooler stuff â€“ fire.

Being mindful of safety, I would use alcohol to set some paper money afire, as well as have a candle re-light after blowing it out.

The most important thing, to me, was to make sure they kids being entertained were also learning about how fire works, why something happens and what makes it that way.

Following that, if the parents ordered it, Iâ€™d move on to dry ice. If not, then Iâ€™d do more experiments with fire and chemicals, explaining as I went. I would make beakers and flasks bubble and boil, change colour and spurt out soap â€¦ all the while explaining the science behind it as I did.

The next step was always my favourite: rockets. If the parents paid the premium, I would talk about space flight, how rockets work, thrust and good old gravity. Then, weâ€™d go outside, prepare mission control and count down to launch.

The birthday boy or girl would press the launch button, of course.

The final step would be to make the take-home activity, which varied from super-bouncy balls, to gooey slime or silly putty. It was messy and aggravating work, but I learned a valuable lesson â€“ sometimes they donâ€™t work, so you better have made some beforehand, or the kids will riot.

And that would be the end, after a short experiment that left them in awe and singing happy birthday. Once the kids left, I would pack up, collect my fee and drive to my next engagement.

It was the perfect job, except the transportation became an issue.

They would have me drive all over the city and surrounding townships with only a one-hour buffer (which was actually 30 minutes, since there was a 15 minute start-up and pack-up time needed).

So, after one disastrous Saturday where I crisscrossed the city and broke the speed limit multiple times in fear of missing the party, I had enough. While the job was fun and management loved me and wanted me to go full-time, I had to call it quits.

I had to make a decision between school and the job, and I chose school, and it was a decision I do not regret to this day.

I did pick up a few â€œvaluable life skillsâ€• from working birthday parties and after-school programs, such as making balloon animals.

And, I am not ashamed to admit, that the job was not being a mad scientist or a science entertainer â€“ no, I was a science clown â€¦ and proud of it!!

For those who just want a little bit more science nerdy-ness in their lives, check out the video below â€“ shot by my good friend, Carin Bondar, at the Science Online 2012 conference!
Can you spot my cameo?

Category

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