

Discovery Museum Delights

By Zach Recht / Journal staff writer



Jacob Hodgson, 5, climbs the walls at the Discovery Museum in Winchester, Va. The museum offers lots of interactive exhibits just for kids. (Journal photos by Ron Agnir)

WINCHESTER, Va. – For a science lab, the Discovery Museum is surprisingly hands-on, inasmuch as its visitors are concerned. Of course, that’s to be expected: The visitors are, for the most part, curious children.

Where other establishments dabbling in physics and aeronautics might bar children outright for fear they might touch the wrong thing and bring down the building, the Discovery Museum in downtown Winchester, Va., has the exact opposite theory: let them play, and they will come.

The idea has panned out. According to the Discovery Museum’s Web site, more than 350,000 visitors have come through the doors since it opened, with 43,500 in 2005 alone. They have an active membership of more than 500 families and more than 6,000 man-hours have been volunteered at the museum since 1996.

Visitor Aaron Greene, 8, of Winchester, Va., was in the physics room busily racing cars down ramps of varying pitch, when he confirmed the theory: “This is really fun. I’m learning, but I’m playing. I wish school were like this.”

At the Discovery Museum, children can feel gravity in action while scaling a climbing wall, learn about the plants, animals and lifestyles native to our area in the American Indian exhibit or study the inner workings of simple machines in an apple shed.

Visitors can go it solo, but there are also experts on each subject who frequent the museum and are more than willing to share their knowledge with visitors.

If your child loves dinosaurs, for example, make a left as you enter the museum and walk straight into the prehistoric eras, where you might meet Geb Bennett, an expert on paleontology and the manager of the museum’s collection of fossils and bones. Of course,

he might not be there because he's often busy on expeditions in Montana, on the lookout for more additions to the collection.

Or perhaps you will meet Mark Lawson, the gallery manager for the Discovery Museum. Lawson specializes in many of the museum's summer activities as well as any parties held there throughout the year. He is always happy to greet a new visitor and makes it a point to get to know them, and encourage them to return.

Jon Greene, father of young Aaron, accompanied his son to the museum. He says he thought it would be an excellent way to spend a summer afternoon.

"If he was at home right now he'd be playing video games or watching TV," says Greene, pointing at Aaron, still occupied by the race tracks. "It being summer vacation and all, most kids don't want to learn, you know? They want to have fun. I guess you could say I'm a little tricky – I told him he was coming here to play. I didn't lie, but he's also learning, right?"

Right, indeed. The Discovery Museum's mission is "to ignite creativity, spark curiosity and inspire learning in visitors of all ages."

The Discovery Museum has been located on Winchester's downtown mall for 11 years, but is now planning a move to Jim Barnett Park, into an \$8 million complex on three-and-a-half acres.

Niki Wilson, the director of marketing and development for the Discovery Museum, says the move is much-needed.

"We're still on the downtown mall for now," Wilson says. "But we are in the process of moving into a new facility. It's going to be much larger, which is something we could really use."

The expansion will allow for more exhibits, more events and more visibility.

The new building will also be the first in the state of Virginia to be rated LEED Platinum, which means it will be on the cutting edge of energy-efficient and environmentally-friendly facilities.

When Aaron Greene was asked if he'd still be visiting the museum once it moved to its new home in Jim Barnett Park, he perked up. "You mean all this will be in a park? Cool!"

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Want to go?

What: Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum

Where: 54 S. Loudoun St., Winchester, Va.

When: Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday; 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday and 5 to 7:30 p.m. on the first Friday of each month. Times and dates may vary, check the Web site for updates.

Cost: \$5 per person. Children under 2 enter free.

For more information: Call the Discovery Museum at (540) 722-2020 or visit online www.discoverymuseum.net.