

TOP STORY

## Meet the new director of the Sciencenter

By Jaime Cone Apr 29, 2017



(Photo: Casey Martin)

New Sciencenter executive director Dean Briere has some big shoes to fill. He's worked at science centers all over the country for nearly three decades, and now he's taking over for Charlie Trautmann, the Ithaca institution's leader of the last 26 years.

Trautman was around when the Sciencenter was first constructed with the help of local volunteers in 1993, and he gave Briere a crash course in the center's rich history, its role in the community and its day to operations.

Now that Trautmann has taken off on a well-earned globe-trotting vacation and Briere has settled into his new role, we asked the new executive director to tell us a little about himself.

**So you've been at the Sciencenter for six weeks? How has it been going so far?**

Wonderful. The first month was like drinking from a firehose, trying learn everything I could. Charlie [Trautmann] was here for the first few weeks, and it was like taking in 26 years worth of what was in his brain. Three weeks was not a lot of time, but it was better than none.

**What has been one of the most surprising or unexpected things you've come to realize about the job so far?**

I think one of the biggest things was recognizing how close the Sciencenter is to the community. This is an amazing organization because it was built by the community, and just to get to know people who can point and say "see that beam right there? I put that nail in that beam," has been eye opening.

I knew it was connected to the community, but having spent last six weeks talking to community members has been an amazing journey.

### **Can you tell me a little bit more about your background?**

I've worked at three different science centers: Discovery Place in Charlotte, NC, (I was there twice in two different roles), and the Challenger Center for Space Science Education in Alexandria, Virginia, developing scenarios for the Challenger Learning Centers, the Arizona Science Center in Phoenix, AZ, and the Museum of Life and Science in Durham, N.C.

Although they are beloved by the community, it's a difference sense. Part of it is the difference in scale of the city and how everyone is really connected to the Sciencenter. As executive director I can open the door and walk out and see the impact I'm having on these young people. I can walk down the street and say I work at the Sciencenter and they say "oh my gosh; I know that place." It's just a wonderful, warm feeling.

### **How did you first become involved with science centers?**

I kind of fell into it. It started when I was in seventh grade, and my best friend in school moved away, and I took it kind of hard. My mother thought that maybe if I volunteered at the Springfield Science Museum in Springfield, MA, I might meet new people and make new friends.

This was at a time before youth programs, so no one really knew what to do with me. I was 13, and I got bounced around from person to person, and then this wonderful woman Patti Bartlett really took me under her wing. She was in marketing and PR, and she just knew how to work with kids. She got me excited about things.

She and I are still friends and stay connected. When I graduated from my undergrad degree in chemistry because I wanted to be research chemist, I found that I loved going to school for chemistry didn't really quite love doing it when I got out of school.

I was looking through the paper one day at these things we used to have in the day in the back of the paper called want ads, and they were looking for a physical science specialist at Discovery Place; I had taught high school for one year, right out of college, so the idea of working for a science center seemed exciting. I said said, "I'll do this until I figure out what I want to do with my life," and that was 28 years ago.

### **What are some of the exhibitions you have worked on that you are most proud of?**

The Dead Sea Scrolls at the Discovery Place in partnership with Pacific Science Center was one of the most amazing projects I've ever worked on. It was one that we were able to rally the entire organization around.

We followed that up immediately with Body Worlds, and then an exhibit about the last day in Pompeii, which was really exciting to work on. It was a collaboration with four different science centers, and I think that's important: collaboration with other organizations instead of competing with other organizations.

### **Is there anything you've encountered in your previous work that you would like to bring to the Sciencenter?**

Four years ago a good friend and colleague of mine in Arizona said he would like me to come work on developing a makerspace at the Arizona Science Center. So we focused on taking this exhibition hall and turning it into something very welcoming for second, third and fourth graders who didn't yet see themselves as going to makerspaces

Makerspaces serve an incredible role within communities. When I was growing up, garages were filled with tools. You learned from your dad or grandfather, and high schools had shop classes. Today that doesn't really exist. Shop classes are not as prevalent as they were in the past. In New York there's BOCES [Board of Cooperative Educational Services], which is a great way to help bridge that gap, but the world has changed. We went from a society that repaired things to a society of "throw it away and buy something new." That idea of using tools and creating things sort of got lost, and that's the reason I believe makerspaces came into being.

**Is the idea of a makerspace something you would like to see take off at the Sciencenter?**

Yeah, so science centers are very welcoming places — not that makerspaces aren't, but you have to consider yourself a maker to go to a makerspace. We want to create a sort of pipeline makerspace in the Sciencenter for younger children to use.

There is the one associated with the library, and that can provide much larger tools, and

then from there people are ending up places like REV [Ithaca Startup Works] downtown in a very entrepreneurial type environment.

A makerspace for younger children is part of what I'd like to see happen here at a scale that's appropriate to the Sciencenter and Ithaca. We have the beginnings of one right outside my office here. The kids are using very low-tech type materials, but is a makerspace, so the idea is to grow that by including more tools that are appropriate for the work the children can do with facilitators.

I would like to see the kids working with wood and 3-D printers; we could even grow it to things like laser cutters, and hitting the art side of it with vinyl printing and sewing. With wood we would have to be careful about using saws, but with the right facilitation and the right guardian supervisor it is doable. I know it can work because I've seen it work.

**What brought you to Ithaca and the Sciencenter?**

The Sciencenter has an incredible reputation nationally due to national collaborative projects and the traveling exhibit program.

Also the community love of this organization is something I knew before I got here, and it really came to life for me once I arrived.

And then Charlie, and the way Charlie has talked about this place. I've known him since the mid 1990s. He was always so energetic about this place and his love for this place.

You're stepping into this role coming off of a very successful fundraising campaign for the Sciencenter. That must feel like a good place to be, starting out.

We just came off a \$4.1 million capital campaign to improve our exhibitions and facilities. The fundraising campaign officially came to a conclusion on February 28, and I officially started on March 1. So I can't take any credit for it, but it is good to be in a place that is financially sound. We had some incredible support from our community on this, and the Sciencenter is what it is today and will continue to grow in the future because of the support that we receive.

**Do you have anything coming up at the Sciencenter that you would like to promote?**

I do! Grossology: the impolite science of the human body... there are so many things that the human body does, from a gurgling stomach to a runny nose that people don't necessarily want to talk about but kids are really enthralled by. We're going to have an exhibit that explains that in a very fun way, May 13 through Labor Day.

We're also going to have family friendly business after-hours on June 1 in conjunction with the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce, so people can do after-hours networking, but they can also have their kids with them, who can play in the Sciencenter from 5 to 7 p.m.