

SOURCE LUNCH:

GLEN WHITNEY

by Miriam Kreinin Soucar



Exec hopes math museum adds up

Glen Whitney, a 43-year-old math professor turned hedge fund manager, will soon realize a dream. In December, he will open the Museum of Mathematics, or MoMath, a state-of-the-art interactive museum at 11 E. 26th St. The executive director created the museum in an effort to excite American youth about the sometimes inscrutable field. He left his lucrative job as an algorithms manager at quantitative hedge fund Renaissance Technologies four years ago and set out to build the cultural institution, raising nearly \$24 million.

What do you want MoMath to achieve?

The mission is to change perceptions about mathematics. One of our trustees put it very simply: If we can show people just three things—that math is fun, that it's beautiful and that with it you can get a really good job—then we'll be a complete success.

Is the United States in trouble because our kids are not up to par in the subject?

Yeah, it's clear, and you don't have to take it from us. I was sitting down with someone from Microsoft Corp. just a couple of weeks ago, and they said last year they had 2,500 positions they couldn't fill because they can't find people with sufficient math and computer science skills. Raytheon Corp. told us they have 4,500 open positions because of the same thing.

What is the coolest thing at the museum?

That's a tough question. My favorite is called Feedback Fractals, probably because of how simple it is. There are four video cameras that are all focused on this screen with which you can create an incredible array of striking images that seem to well up out of nowhere.

Is this actually math?

People ask us that a lot about our exhibits because we're bringing out these aspects of math that people, unfortunately and sadly, don't get to see in their whole 2,000 hours of

forced math exposure over the course of kindergarten to 12th grade. This is math in a whole number of ways. The simplest way is just the understanding that there is a repeating pattern, and that is the root of mathematics.

How did you raise all the money for the museum? Did you hit up your hedge fund friends?

There were a number of things we had to do: Build a board of trustees, raise money, find advisers, find volunteers. Like anything, it's like ripples in a pond. You start with the people you know. The first rule was go to every [relevant event] and tell everyone you see and meet about this idea.

Did you meet your fundraising goal?

We have one area of critical need: exhibit sponsorship. Our exhibits are very innovative, so we got estimates of how much they would cost. But the fabricators said they've never built anything like this before. As a result, the quotes came out much higher than the estimates had been. We will open with about 35 of the planned exhibits. But we still need to raise another \$1.5 million to \$2 million to complete the vision and get to 45 exhibits eventually.

WHERE THEY DINED

DB BISTRO MODERNE

55 W. 44th St.
(212) 391-2400
www.danielnyc.com/dbbistro.htm#intro

AMBIENCE:

Daniel Boulud's upscale French bistro packs in a noisy lunch crowd of well-heeled business executives

WHAT THEY ATE:

■ Chilled potato leek soup, lobster salad

■ Chilled tomato soup, duck paté du jour, baked chocolate mousse

■ Tab. \$151.50, including tax and tip

What is the target age for the museum?

The people we try to keep in mind as we're creating things is fourth through eighth grade. Kids in elementary school are often excited by math and science, and the kids who are good at it are heroes. Then something happens in middle school, where suddenly it's not cool to be good at math and science. We want to target that age and have a place that's really cool, a place where it's safe to express your love for mathematics.

Were you stigmatized for loving math as a kid?

There were other folks in my high school that got, shall we say, ribbed for being the brainiac, and I was very conscious that I didn't want that to happen to me. So I tried to lie low a little bit. ■

INSIDE TIP: If you can't get a dinner reservation, sit at the bar area's communal table and pray for a cancellation