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CITY NEWS

URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

Making Math Fun (Seriously)

Here are some of the things I hate: Water bugs, poison ivy, bullies, fishy-tasting salmon, scaffolding, grizzle, Adam Sandler movies and math. It was the last of these that brought me to Glen Whitney. Mr. Whitney isn't a shrink, or even an SAT tutor. He's a former hedge-fund guy and the founder of the Museum of Mathematics, scheduled to open in 2012.

"We'll start by renting a modest amount of space," explained Mr. Whitney as he sat in "MOMATH's" offices in the West 20s surrounded by games and puzzles of the sort his museum will feature. The goal, he said, is to create "a dynamite, terrific experience where kids say, 'You have to take me to that, it's really cool,' and the parents have a good time despite themselves."

I don't want to say I'm skeptical about the idea of a museum devoted to mathematics. Indeed, I can recall the deep satisfaction I felt on the all-too-rare occasions at school when the concepts or formulas fell into place. It seemed an entirely different discipline from writing, where something arises from a blank page through a combination of hard work and patience, with a sliver of creativity. With math, the experience is more like discovering something that's always existed and finally decided to stop playing hard-to-get.

I can imagine how much fun math could be if you were actually good at it; I'm just not sure how you represent those elusive mental processes through exhibits, especially when you're located in a city filled with museums and competing for attention against more easily accessible wonders—such as dinosaur fossils and Rose Period Picassos.

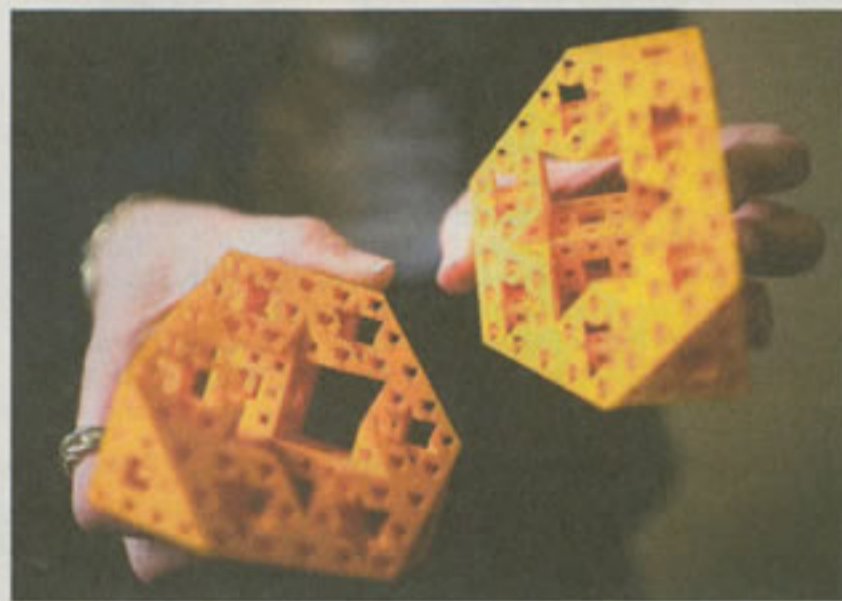
Mr. Whitney and his chief of operations, Cindy Lawrence, a CPA, gave me a taste of the excitement to come with a device they're calling "The Ring of Fire." It's a laser-lighted circle that reveals the geometric structures hiding inside a seemingly innocent transparent cylinder. There were also monkey puzzles. And, of course, there's going to be a museum shop. They already have MOMATH T-shirts. "Our problem isn't trying to fill the museum. It's cutting enough," Mr. Whitney said. "Which of these things are we possibly not going to have in the museum? We could fill a much larger institution."

He said that he's currently in negotiations for street front space. "We wanted to call it the National Museum of Math," he said. "It turns out you need a congressional designation."

Fund raising is in progress, much of it thus far coming from the hedge-fund and technology worlds. "These folks tend to be invested in the no-



Glen Whitney and Cindy Lawrence, above, of the Museum of Mathematics, and some of their exhibits.



tion that it's important to get people excited, and for our country to get people excited about math," Mr. Whitney explained.

Last week, the Museum of Math presented the first in a series of monthly lectures, the inaugural talk on "The Geometry of Origami" by Erik Demaine, a 30-year-old genius M.I.T. professor. Mr. Demaine was introduced by Jim Simons, the founder of Renaissance Technologies, the hedge fund where Mr. Whitney also made his fortune. Mr. Simons is perhaps better known for having earned an estimated \$2.8 bil-

lion in 2007 than for his work earlier in his career with the Institute for Defense Analyses or as the 1976 winner of the American Mathematical Society's Oswald Veblen Prize for Geometry. "I'm Jim Simons," Mr. Simons told the crowd of several hundred gathered in a large conference room at Baruch College. "I'm a mathematician of sorts. From teaching, to code breaking, to money making, it's all based on mathematics—and it's all worked out."

I asked Mr. Whitney, who also welcomed the gathering dressed in a natty dark polo shirt with the MOMATH logo, and who taught math at the University of Michigan after graduating from Harvard, why he thinks mathematicians seem to have an advantage in the hedge-fund world. "You have to have trust in the algorithms you've created," he explained. "The discipline of math, to some extent, gives you the confidence to say, 'I did these calculations and I'm going to trust in that even when it goes against my instincts.'"

"I did OK," he said, referring to his own stint at Renaissance Technologies as an algorithm manager. "I'm in the lucky position where I don't have to worry about the size of my personal income. It comes

with a responsibility that I do something valuable, worthwhile, that benefits society."

I also wanted to contribute to the museum's success. So I suggested Mr. Whitney and Ms. Lawrence fill a giant jar, say 10' feet high, with gum balls and ask kids how many were in the jar. There must be some sort of mathematical formula that governs the answer and minimizes guesswork. Apparently, Mr. Whitney had already thought of the gum-ball game and rejected it, realizing through personal family experience that it encourages cavities.

"When my daughter got to fourth grade, the teacher wanted to promote interest in math," and did the gum-ball guessing game, he remembered. "My kids had grown up in our home; this was bread and butter to them. She came home having won the assembly three weeks in a row. I said, 'We need to figure out a little bit of a different tack here.'"

Nonetheless, it's that familiarity, ease and perhaps ge-

A dynamite, terrific experience where kids say, 'You have to take me to that, it's really cool.'

netic predisposition with math that he's help foster in his own children that Mr. Whitney hopes to promote in the larger population, perhaps even sparking the next Einstein on a museum school visit. "We're constantly bombarded with the message—you've got to read to your kids. But we also have to give them quantitative experiences," he said. "It's certainly our intention to afford every visitor the opportunity to discover something not only new to themselves, but to the world."

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