Connecting with Community: Seizing the opportunities that come your way can have a big impact

By Carman Howard

Early in 2013, the College of Medicine at Peoria (UICOMP) approached the Library of the Health Sciences at Peoria (LHS-P) about participating as a partner in the Peoria Academy of Science’s Treasure Hunt. Because the UIC Libraries have such a long history of outreach, we were thrilled to be given this opportunity to connect with the community.

This year marked the 24th annual Science Treasure Hunt sponsored by the Peoria Academy of Science. The treasure hunt is a summer program with the goal of encouraging students to explore science and technology while learning more about careers in the sciences. The program is open to 1st through 8th grade students who are eligible to win prizes if they attend at least eight of the Science Sites. LHS-P and UICOMP were pleased to be one of the 21 Science Sites featured this year and the only health sciences site.

Each site is responsible for designing a fun science experience that includes three to five questions to answer. Students are given a passport describing each location, which includes these questions. Other sites’ activities this year ranged from a hosted tour by the Air National Guard to a completely self-directed experience at the Giant Oak Park (home to a 300-year-old tree). Working with the College of Medicine, the Library
designed its experience to highlight the Peoria campus and to provide a short lesson on the circulatory system. Our site asked kids to follow a set of instructions to find answers to four questions. The experience included finding a book in the stacks, reading about early experiments with frogs, watching a short online cartoon, and more.

The treasure hunt was open from late April through early September. Most of our visitors came in small family groups throughout the summer months, and staff enjoyed meeting everyone. One of the highlights for us was a large group visit from day campers at the South Side Mission. These middle school students enjoyed answering the treasure hunt questions and going on a guided library tour. The human skeleton was a big hit! During this visit, several of our medical students took the time to share information about healthy eating and play their version of Jeopardy® with the kids.

We were extremely pleased to have nearly 100 people from the Peoria area visit the Library as part of the hunt. Throughout the summer, we received lots of positive feedback and many expressions of thanks. Some were comments like “this is fun” and “love all your signs” – yes, we did have arrows all over the library. However, some comments suggested greater impact: one adult told us that she was thrilled to find out we were open to the public because she was an allied health sciences student at a local community college.
Although it’s too early to say if we inspired any budding scientists, we certainly feel that we helped to make health science fun! This was a wonderful outreach experience for us and touched on many of the community-oriented goals of the Library of the Health Sciences and the College of Medicine. We are happy to report that the Peoria Academy of Science has invited us back for next year’s hunt because several kids identified us as a favorite site. We are already planning and looking forward to next year and hopefully many more years to come!

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