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Celebrating Brain Awareness Week

By: Erin Maguire , For The Bulletin

Touching human brains, eating jelly beans and talking to neuroscientists are only some of the engaging activities enjoyed by students from elementary through high school at the Franklin Institute on Thursday and Friday.

The event, sponsored by the Philadelphia chapter of the Society of Neuroscience, was part of Brain Awareness Week: a global initiative started by The Dana Foundation in 1996.

The Dana Foundation, a private philanthropic organization that promotes education in neuroscience, immunology, and the arts, founded Brain Awareness Week 13 years ago to commemorate the progress of brain research around the world. This year, 2100 partner organizations from 73 countries on six continents participated. From March 10 through 16, schools, hospitals, professional associations and government agencies celebrate brain research through lectures, the release of research papers, and, especially, activities that appeal to young people.

In Philadelphia, Brain Awareness Week activities were planned by graduate students in the Philadelphia chapter of the Society of Neuroscience including: Maria Waselus and Jill Yersak from Thomas Jefferson University, Sara Jane Ward and Jordan Trecki from Temple University, Amanda Dawson from University of Pennsylvania and Ann Mae Stellwag from Drexel University.

The first event of the week, held in the Harcourt Learning Center at The Franklin Institute, attracted students from hundreds of schools.

While the Franklin Institute has hosted Brain Awareness Week events for over 10 years, this year featured some new attractions. One novel activity was the optical illusion show, in which huge graphics created in PowerPoint were projected on a screen. Describing the show, Jean Byrne, project coordinator at the Franklin Institute, said, "When the brain transmits information, sometimes what we see isn't actually there." After the display, the students were able to ask a neuroscientist questions about the brain.

Other programs that debuted at the Franklin Institute's Brain Awareness Week event this year were the Ben Franklin Table and Build-a-Neuron Table. Students learned of Franklin's fascination with electricity in the brain at the table dedicated to his science. They built models of neurons out of Styrofoam balls and pipe cleaners a few tables down.

"The purpose of Brain Awareness Week is to bring in kids of all ages to learn about the brain," Ms. Yersak said. The event was targeted to school groups, but anyone who visited the Institute on Thursday and Friday was invited to participate.

And those who did participate had fun while learning about the brain. Students discovered the connection between the senses of taste and smell by holding their noses and eating red jellybeans. One of the beans was cinnamon-flavored and the other cherry. But, when their sense of smell was inhibited, the students couldn't tell by taste the difference between the two. "We explain through this activity why sometimes when you're sick, you can't taste food," said Ms. Waselus.

Other students took advantage of decorating headgear at a different station. Swimming caps were provided on which students could stencil the lobes of the brain. Ms. Yersak explained that, "some of the kids wear these hats all day long.

"Brain Awareness Week is a great way for kids to learn about neuroscience. The activities are very interactive and engage kids. The event gets kids to maybe think about a career in neuroscience too. It's fun," she continued.

While primary school students gained knowledge about the brain from the event, the graduate student organizers and volunteers also benefited. Ms. Yersak, a second year volunteer, said graduate students are able to "interact with kids and even learn teaching skills. Many volunteers come back, and new people come to volunteer each year," she added.

Ms. Waselus, who has volunteered for the past five years, also sees advantages for participants, planners and the community at large. "The kids get to see that we're excited about what we do, that we're people, too, and we don't just sit in the lab all

day," she said.

"This event is an opportunity for us to give back to the community. It is also a great chance for graduate students to network. And, the community benefits from Brain Awareness Week because they have access to information about the brain that they may not have received if they had not attended the event," Ms. Waselus added.

On Saturday from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m., The Franklin Institute will continue celebrating Brain Awareness Week with a "Keeping the Brain Safe" presentation by Brain Injury Association of Pennsylvania. Doctors, surgeons and other professionals who deal with brain injuries will explain to young people the importance of keeping the brain safe. Free bicycle helmets will be distributed at the event.

In addition to The Franklin Institute events, the Brain Awareness Week campaign will be promoted at Kids Judge! Neuroscience Fair, which will be hosted by The University of Pennsylvania on March 26. Even though this event falls on a date outside of Brain Awareness Week, it is still considered part of the celebration since March is Brain Injury Awareness month.

At Kids Judge! Neuroscience Fair, students from local elementary schools will get a taste of the role and power of "teacher" as they grade neuroscience projects presented by The University of Pennsylvania undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.

While Brain Awareness Week has existed for 13 years, it continues to grow with each anniversary. More events take place, more people participate and more information about brain research is shared.

Kathleen Roina, director of the Brain Awareness Campaign for the Dana Foundation, said, "Brain Awareness Week is important for the public to learn more about the brain. The brain is central to who we are and what we do. The campaign also helps scientists to get support for what they do - in their communities, in their countries and in the world."

The Franklin Institute's Jean Byrne is thankful to have Brain Awareness Week activities at her home institution on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. She said, "Our mission at The Franklin Institute is to create a passion in science learning. Brain Awareness Week is a great opportunity to partner with other organizations to help spread this message."

To learn more about Brain Awareness Week or the Dana Foundation, visit <http://brainweek.dana.org/>. The Web site includes an international events calendar, education resources, downloadable graphics, puzzles, publications, and general information.

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