

News

Office of Medical Information
The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas
5323 Harry Hines Boulevard Dallas, Texas 75235-9060 214/688-3404

February 13, 1990

CONTACT: Ann Harrell
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/520-7509
Fax: 214/688-8252

****Immunology student capitalizes
on science parties

For a serious first-year graduate student in immunology at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, John Armstrong spends a lot of time partying. In fact, he says he's "trying not to turn anything down."

But Armstrong is far from your usual "party animal." And his parties are pretty extraordinary too. For one thing, his fellow revelers are 5 through 12 years old.

That's because Armstrong is the creator and owner of a party-package program called "Einstein Science Birthday Parties" in Dallas. Parties are tailored to different age groups, and the fun doesn't end when the party's over. Every guest at an Einstein party takes home a personal craft project that fits the party's theme.

The science-theme birthday parties serve twin purposes: making science "fascinating and fun," and helping Armstrong meet family responsibilities while he works toward his Ph.D. The graduate student hopes to specialize in transplant immunology. He became interested in that field when he worked in the laboratory of Dr. Ingemar Dawidson in UT Southwestern's Department of Surgery.

Among Armstrong's most popular science parties are:

(More)

* **Alchemy party**--Armstrong explains the relationship between "magic" in olden days--much of which is know as chemistry today--and modern chemistry. After hearing about the ancient belief that the alchemist could change base metal into gold by using the right substances and invoking the appropriate spirits, alchemy party guests get to sand down iron nails and drop the iron shavings into an acid solution to which a few pennies have been added. Armstrong then "calls on the spirits" to begin the transformation. By the end of the party, of course, the nail shavings are wearing a bright new copper coat.

* **Photosynthesis party**--Children learn about the effects of ultraviolet light by cutting out paper shapes, exposing them to the sun and watching the images develop slowly as they are held over a sheet of chemically treated paper on which "pictures" of the shapes appear as if by magic. They also discover the many ways the sun helps us and some of the ways it can hurt us, finding out about solar heating as well as why people should wear sunglasses, for example.

* **Chemical changes party**--Armstrong makes a party game of basic chemistry. Each child is given a container of liquid to keep while he prepares them for an activity. "Then I tell them I've made a mistake," he explains. "I ask them to pour their liquids back in a big jar. They don't realize that each one is holding a different chemical because the liquids are all clear. As they pour them in one at a time, the colors keep changing." Armstrong explains that with each color change, something new has been created.

* **Dinosaur "digs"**--The main prop for a dinosaur dig is a large bucket filled with gravel. After Armstrong tells them about

dinosaurs, children crowd around, digging for dinosaur bones. Then they try to put the bones together to reconstruct different types of dinosaurs.

* **Dinosaur egg hunt**--A take-off on Easter egg hunts, the dinosaur egg hunt uses reproductions of dinosaur eggs that open. Inside each "egg" is a message with instructions for an individual, dinosaur-related activity. Each party goer follows his or her egg's instructions; then the children tell each other about their results.

* **Dinosaur safari**--A tape recorder leads older children on a fantasy journey through a dinosaur-infested land. Books and pictures are also used.

* **Astronomy party**--This party, which includes some of the mythological stories about the constellations and comparisons between the solar system and atomic models, takes place after dark to make best use of nature's laboratory in the sky.

Laser parties are next on Armstrong's agenda.

Armstrong finds the science parties so much fun that "if I weren't a grad student, I'd put even more time into it." But for now, he's just trying to earn enough to send his son Charles, 8, to a Montessori school near their home in Irving. (Another son, Stephen, 7, is living with his mother, Paula Armstrong, in Illinois.) He charges \$50 for a one-hour party for 10 children and \$5 for each additional child.

The graduate student would like to expand his science-theme party business by hiring other graduate students and training them. (He started that way himself, with a dinosaur party he put on while working with Dallas theme-party planner Rai Barras. The two still

cooperate on parties sometimes.)

Armstrong isn't concerned about his trainees stealing his ideas. "It takes a lot of time and energy and money to think up the ideas, develop them, get all the props and craft materials together, and get a van to carry everything around in," he explained.

And if someone did, "that wouldn't be ripping off," Armstrong chuckled. "That's competition."

###

NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.