

## New Epcot display not on fence about science



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Here's an exchange you might not expect at Walt Disney World:

"Wow! It's magic," he said.

"No, it's science," she replied.

But there it was, part of the SpectacuLAB production that's taking place at Epcot on the east side of Innoventions. The idea is to get kids intrigued and inspired by science.

SpectacuLAB demonstrations, held five times daily, center around a character named Frankie who is portrayed as an intern on his or her (note Disney's sly gender-neutral name) first day. Frankie is flanked by two real-life scientists attached to the real-life Science

From Scientists group.

The science types teach Frankie — and, by extension, the audience — lessons that are fun, starting with a set of ultrasonic drums that basically plays wacky sound effects without being touched. The crew draws parallels to cars enabled with sensors to detect objects behind them. (Side kudos for the couplet on the wall that rhymes "ultrasonic" with "neurotic.")

"I always say Epcot is credible; it's authentic, and this is really a perfect example of that," said Melissa Valiquette, vice president of Epcot, after SpectacuLAB's grand opening. "Our whole vision here is about inspiring, informing, educating. So I really think we couldn't have found a better fit."

Additional experiments showcase barometric pressure by using big cubes that light up — and audience participation that builds to a memorable sequence about force (No, not the “Star Wars” force, Frankie.) It includes a bed of nails, and, honestly, I was kind of hoping for Frankie to be the subject of the experiment, but, apparently, it’s not allowed in our intern’s contract.

Instead, a scientist is lowered onto a literal bed of nails, then a small board of nails put on her torso, followed by a cinder block and a solid whack courtesy of the other scientist with a sledgehammer. Ouch. Ouch?

Nope. Since pressure equals force divided by area, the potential pain was spread out and a non-factor. Frankie and I were impressed.

The show has been in the works since Science From Scientists, an organization that promotes STEM literacy, was involved in science week programming at Disney World in 2014.

We had to talk about what the experiments would be and how to present them,” said Erica Ebbel Angle, executive director of Science From Scientists. “I think we’re both very dedicated to the story and making it fun and exciting.” SpectacuLAB is presented by Murata, an electronics company.

Having authentic science professionals on hand also serves as inspiration.

“Kids very rarely have the opportunity to meet real scientists,” Angle said.

The new attraction is across the aisle from Colortopia, and the signage for the shuttered Sum of All Thrills display peeks over a construction wall. SpectacuLAB might give hope to fans of Innoventions, which is largely unpopulated. Can they expect more in the revamped Epcot alongside big-name attractions based on “Guardians of the Galaxy” and “Ratatouille”?

Valiquette had no news on grand-opening day.

“Of course, we have announced a grand new vision for the whole center of the park, so I’ll just say that this is a great sign of things to come ... but progress takes time,” she said.

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