

What It's Like to Volunteer at a Science Festival

May 16, 2018

As in years past, the 2018 [USA Science and Engineering Festival \(USASEF\)](#) swarmed with school groups and families. ASM was there to capitalize on the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) buzz and raise awareness of the microbial sciences. I volunteered at the ASM exhibit booth, workshops and career sessions along with 30 other ASM members.

ASM Activities at the USASEF

ASM has been a part of the USASEF since the first festival in 2010, and our presence has grown with the festival. This year, we hosted an exhibit booth with activities exploring microbiology in everyday life. Visitors took a virtual trip to the grocery store to explore the role of microbes in food production, answered "Which Microbe Are You?" quiz questions and earned a souvenir button for the microbiome resident that best matched their "infectious personality." Playing "Pathogen Plinko" helped visitors learn how various health-related behaviors influence what happens after you encounter the flu—whether you stay healthy (and win a prize!) or get sick.



An ASM volunteer discusses microbes found in our food with a young festival attendee.

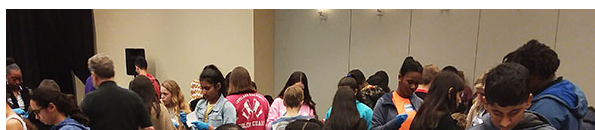
ASM also hosted its first ever Xtreme-STEM workshop where almost 200 students were introduced to infectious disease epidemiology. We challenged students to determine who the index case was for a mysterious outbreak of "senioritis." Along the way, they learned about a variety of microbiology careers linked to public health.

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Students work through an activity on infectious disease epidemiology at the ASM XSTEM workshop.

ASM members also shared their education and career advice with kids as part of “Meet the Scientists.”

Understanding Public Perspectives About Microbes

I volunteer at USASEF because I get to share my personal perspective on the microbial world. Most importantly, I learn how others perceive microbes. Imagine the responses you get when you ask a passerby, “Have you eaten a microbe today?” As you might expect, they vary from giggles to disgust, and everything in between.

The real goal of these encounters is to start a dialogue that draws people in to explore the exhibit, ask questions and share their views. One of the most common questions I get is, “What IS a microbe?” This is where the real fun begins. You get to witness the excitement as a young child peers through a microscope at yeast cells for the first time. That leads to conversations about how yeast cells are used to make bread, how they make bread rise and how microbes are used to make many other foods and food ingredients.

For me, the most rewarding interactions are when students work up the courage to ask how they can get started with science in college or as a career. It is important to listen to what students want and encourage them to experience science firsthand.



Dr. Dave Westenberg talks to USASEF 2018 attendees about what it's like to be a scientist at the Meet a Scientist event.

It's Infectious, You Too Can Do Science Outreach!

Reports like the 2017 National Academy of Sciences' *Communicating Science Effectively: A Research Agenda* show there is a growing communication gap between scientists and the public. We must work to increase public confidence in science. As scientists and ASM members, we can help bridge this gap by volunteering to publicly communicate science.

Science outreach in your local community and schools can be fun and helps people understand and appreciate science. There are many ways to get started, including

- Participating in career fairs.
- Sharing hands-on activities in after-school programs.
- Working with teachers to bring more [STEM activities](#) into their classrooms.
- Judging science fairs.
- Advising students working on science fair projects.

Browse our [ASM K-12 lesson plan collection](#) to get ideas on science outreach activities or, if you developed your own outreach activities, consider publishing them in [ASM's Journal of Microbiology and Biology Education](#).

Whatever outreach activity you choose, be sure to go into the event with an open mind, ready to learn. The most valuable

outcome of sharing our science is to learn how others perceive what we do.

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