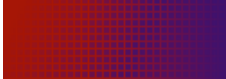


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2theadvocate Entertainment

LSU exhibit offers a hands-on experience of the frozen South

BY GEORGE MORRIS

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When Sophie Warny became education director at LSU's Museum of Natural Science two years ago, it wasn't because she lacked enough to do. She was thinking about her daughters, then ages 5 and 3.

"I wanted my children to have some interesting things in Baton Rouge, and so I started volunteering at the museum doing outreach programs and trying to improve the museum education program," Warny said. "They had nobody at the time to take care of it."

In addition to being a scientist, Warny is a master of understatement. Figuratively speaking, the museum in Foster Hall had been frozen in amber for almost a half century, almost as well preserved as the birds, insects and various animals on display. There had been no major exhibit changes since 1956, when the last of the animal life dioramas was completed, said Mark Hafner, the museum's assistant director.

No longer. Under Warny's direction, Experience Antarctica opened this spring, putting on display research by several LSU faculty members and providing a hands-on, interactive element to the museum. The exhibit is designed to look like the inside of a Quonset hut research building on the frozen continent, complete with video depictions of a bleak, wind-swept view through the



Advocate staff photo by Bill Feig.

Mark Hafner, assistant director of LSU's Museum of Natural Science, stands in front of the Experience Antarctica exhibit. The corrugated metal backdrop is made to resemble the Quonset huts once used as scientific stations there.

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"windows."

Feedback has been complimentary, much to Warny's relief.

"I was terrified they were going to kill me," she laughed. "I was petrified. When the company came and picked up everything and started building, I didn't know how anybody would react. I'm a pretty junior person at the museum, and it's been like that for many years, so I didn't know how people would react. But it's been very positive."

Why Antarctica? Although Warny has never been there, her husband, LSU geology-geophysics associate professor Philip Bart, goes every year to perform seismic research. As well, Warny's research involves Antarctica.

Warny is a palynologist -- a scientist who studies pollen. Specifically, Warny studies pollen fossils discovered in sediment cores extracted from Antarctica. The quantity and varieties of pollen and spores found at different layers give scientists an idea of what kind of plants might have grown there thousands and millions of years ago.

Warny's research is illustrated in the exhibit, which covers the history of the continent, explains theories about why Antarctica is where it is and why it is so cold. Other topics include the history of Antarctic exploration, how the freezing and melting of its ice affects global sea levels and current scientific research. Museum Director Frederick Sheldon, Associate Curator Judith Schiebout and LSU geology faculty members Huiming Bao, Gary Byerly, Barbara Dutrow, Barun Sen Gupta and John Wrenn contributed to the exhibit. "You see how it contrasts with all of the traditional exhibits here, but it brings in the geology dimension of the museum that was never really emphasized at all in the past," Hafner said.

It's not all geology, though. A highly visual feature of Experience Antarctica is a replica of a Cryolophosaurus skull. Cryolophosaurus was one of the dinosaurs which once lived in Antarctica in warmer times. There are displays of plant life and rare meteorite samples.

The museum charges no admission, so Warny had to locate about \$150,000 to build the exhibit. The Louisiana Board of Regents, Irene W. and C.B. Pennington Foundation and the National Science Foundation came through with funding. Southwest Museum Services of Houston designed the exhibit.

Creating a museum exhibit for college students is one thing. Making one that will withstand the rigors of younger patrons is something else. Classes of elementary school and younger children occasionally pass through, so it helped that Warny had brought her children with her the first night the exhibit opened. "The first thing they do is poke their finger on the TV screen," she said. "I had the team come back and put up some Plexiglas to prevent that. I saw some other kids just hanging on the microscope. It's kind of wild."

The exhibit is open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays through Fridays.

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