

American Museum of Science and Energy receives “Overcomer” Award

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 14, 2019)

Our American Museum of Science and Energy recently was recognized by the Association of Science and Technology Centers with the first of a new category of awards, the “Overcomer” award. This award recognizes and celebrates an ASTC-member science center or museum that has successfully surmounted a significant and specific challenge.

The Association of Science and Technology Centers 2019 Conference was hosted by the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The event was attended by 1,300 people and the common theme throughout the conference speeches – diversity, equality, cultures and science go together.

Todd Happer of ASTC said at the conference that the Association of Science and Technology Centers organization was founded in 1973. Amazingly, on further discussion, Todd indicated the idea for this unique organization was actually formulated at the American Museum of Atomic Energy while in the Jefferson Avenue location!

Susan Straight of ASTC responded to my email inquiry to validate the origin of the organization. She said, “You are correct about ASTC's connection to Oak Ridge! As Todd mentioned, our records show that the original group of science centers and museums involved in forming our association first met at Oak Ridge in 1971 and then incorporated as the Association of Science-Technology Centers in 1973. This year, the association's name changed to the Association of Science and Technology Centers.”

ASTC supports science and technology centers and museums to thrive—now and in the future—as they engage their communities in science and technology. It now represents nearly 700 organizational members that welcome more than 120 million people each year in more than 50 countries around the world. ASTC champions public engagement with science, together with its members sets course for new frontiers, and facilitates connections among its member organizations and the professionals who work in them. Here is the link to their web site: www.astc.org

Their press release states “The first Leading Edge Overcomer Award goes to the American Museum of Science and Energy in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which needed to move from its beloved but aging, 54,000-square-foot facility into a new, 18,000-square-foot space, with state-of-the-art new exhibits.”

The release recognizes our efforts to “engage its community in the move through extensive new collaborations and partnerships that melded a science-rich local history, civic pride, culture, and enthusiasm for STEM engagement into something uniquely Oak Ridge.”

The award recognizes the contributions to the transition team by the Department of Energy Office of Science, National Nuclear Security Administration, DOE Office of Environmental Management, the Manhattan Project National Historical Park and the American Museum of Science and Energy Foundation, as well as community leaders, museum professionals and volunteers. Being one of the team members who worked months to successfully transition AMSE into the much smaller space, I certainly appreciate the recognition of such hard work by all the team members.

In her speech accepting the Roy L Shafer Leading Edge, the Overcomer Award, Mildred Lopez-Ferre, the AMSE Transition DOE Project Manager, said, “The smaller space, funding limitation and community acceptance were some of the major challenges. This fact was a major hardship to overcome, but made the museum team resilient and unleashed its creativity.”

She went on to say, “We partnered with the community, scientists from Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the Environmental Cleanup Program Office, Y-12 National Security Complex and businesses to create the best visitor experience in the new facility.”

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Mildred also said, “The key is to be positive, transparent, and to share a factually based inspirational message that communicates hope for the institution’s future.” And I would agree with her that is exactly what the transition team did and did well. After several months in the new facility the AMSE experience is proving to be a strong element in Oak Ridge’s science and heritage tourism.

Mildred concluded her acceptance remarks with, “we were pleasantly surprised when a 10-year-old visitor exclaimed ‘I want to live in the museum!’” What a testament...

The award marks the results of a new course that has been successfully set by AMSE to remain at the center of science and heritage tourism in the region regardless and maybe in spite of the forced reduction in available exhibit space. Creative use of limited space has been required, and has resulted in more efficient use of the available space and even alternative methods of presenting educational programs.

Special evening programs have added successful outreach. A return to rotating temporary exhibits successfully invites return visitors. The Manhattan Project National Historical Park sponsored the first of these rotating temporary exhibits which was well received by the visitors. They continue to provide support and more rotating exhibits on a regular basis.

The concept of “hub and spoke” science and heritage tourism is a maturing concept being implemented by three museums, AMSE, The Children’s Museum of Oak Ridge (which includes the Manhattan Project National Historical Park Visitor Center) and the Oak Ridge History Museum. Soon the K-25 History Center will be an added “spoke” as is the Y-12 History Center and the Graphite Reactor. Explore Oak Ridge is helping promote the “hub and spoke” concept as well.

The DOE facilities Public Bus Tours with support from the Manhattan Project National Historical Park staff recently held a successful series of pilot tours in August, 2019. Experience gained from those tours is expected to be used to modify and expand the public tours originating from AMSE. Some additional facilities, both within the city and the government sites, are being considered for added public access through expanded tours with more Park Service staff involvement. The intent is to allow our Manhattan Project National Historical Park to lead the way toward more authentic visitor experiences.

This special award recognizing AMSE as an “Overcomer” can be applicable to more than just the museum. It can be perceived, and rightly so, as recognition to all of Oak Ridge! We are pulling together as a team to enhance Science and Heritage Tourism.

The evolution of AMSE toward more of a science museum enabled the creation of a new museum, the Oak Ridge History Museum, operated by volunteers of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association. This new museum just received an award from the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance which will be presented on November 14, 2019, in the Bijou Theater in Knoxville.

Oak Ridge is contributing to the regional science and heritage tourism and that is being recognized as more and more venues are created and tours expanded. All too often it is most difficult for those of us closest to the situation to see the value of what is available to us.

One example is: The Manhattan Project National Historical Park scheduled a Tennis Court Dance and Costume Contest from 6 to 9 p.m. Friday, October 11, in the Jackson Square tennis courts. The free event features swing dancing music from the 1940s World War II era. It commemorates one of the primary entertainment methods during the early Oak Ridge days.

Another example is: The Children’s Museum of Oak Ridge has just received an \$1,800 donation for the Flattop house renovation from the Oak Ridge Panhellenic Alumnae Association. Several of their members

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lived in Flattops as children and they are very excited about the project. Another example of support for heritage tourism coming from Oak Ridger's.

Others looking at Oak Ridge see our history and the science being created as amazing...we may just take it for granted. Such recognition as these two awards to two of our museums should tell us it just might be okay to take pride in what we have. While not recognized with awards at this time, the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, the Manhattan Project National Historical Park, the Y-12 History Center and the soon to be open K-25 History Center also are all significant contributors to the overall science and heritage tourism efforts.

The Association of Science and Technology Centers concluded its press release for the Leading Edge Award Overcomer Award by stating, "This new approach has launched the museum on a new course to becoming a hub in a 'hub and spoke' heritage and science tourism ecosystem that includes other important science and history sites in the region and toward being a premiere destination the community takes pride in."

We should take that thought to heart. We certainly do have much to be proud of and much to show our visitors. Katy Jett of Explore Oak Ridge sure does! She is working with these museums and the Park Service to put up wayside markers, create tour guide booklets, pamphlets and brochures as well as marketing our assets to travel writers and publications. Pulling together, as I have shown we are doing now produces increased revenue for all and increased exposure of our city and region to visitors passing by on their way to the Smokies! We are fast becoming a Science and Heritage Tourism destination!

I am delighted when I am asked to do "step-on" tour guide duty for tourism buses coming to our city. I know they are going to be amazed by what I show them and by the Oak Ridge people with whom I bring them in contact. This activity is growing significantly.

So, swell up with pride for AMSE and the Oak Ridge History Museum receiving their awards! The staff and volunteers there deserve our praise and appreciation! Also be proud of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park, the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, the Y-12 History Center, the K-25 Overlook/Visitor Center, and soon the K-25 History Center! We have a lot to offer and the visitors are coming to learn about Oak Ridge's science and heritage!

Here is a link to a video created by the ATSC Conference where the award was presented:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ah7c0oe7y7g10x4/AAAagMS-bk-WE7o3MPyijm0pa?dl=0&preview=AMSE+Award+Video.mp4>

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