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“DOODLE BUGS” BRINGS WONDER OF NATURAL HISTORY TO CHILDREN

Monthly program offers shared learning experience for kids and parents, grandparents

MARTINSVILLE, Va. (February 16, 2006) – When Virginia Museum of Natural History educator Christy Deatherage brings out a skunk, dinosaur bones, or offers up a bear’s mouth for children to put their hands in, it quickly becomes clear that this is no ordinary learning experience. VMNH’s popular “Doodle Bugs” program provides children ages 3-5 with these and other exciting, hands-on educational programs every month at the museum. The next program, *Animal Homes*, will be held on February 22 at the museum from 10 – 11 a.m. and 3 – 4 p.m.

“Doodle Bugs” began at VMNH as a pilot program in 2004, quickly gaining popularity because of its unique feature requiring a parent or guardian to join their child in the program. Packed with fun activities, stories, games and crafts, “Doodle Bugs” caters to children’s fascination with the natural world and helps them learn about natural history through investigation and hands-on experiences. Dr. Dennis Casey, director of education and public programs at VMNH, said the main intent of Doodle Bugs is for children to be given the opportunity to experience things in a fun, accepting environment, and to explore their senses.

“Children at this age see the world in wonder,” Casey said. “Everything is new – nothing has been interpreted for them already, and they haven't developed strong impressions yet about how to look at things and how to think about the world. It is also enjoyable for parents and grandparents – who learn right alongside children.”

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Deatherage, the museum's education coordinator, said interest in the program grew among parents seeking educational programs for young children.

"I had a lot of interest from parents with younger children that were interested in natural history topics and loved visiting the museum," Deatherage said. "I also had some calls from the general public inquiring if we offered programs for the 3-5 age range. So, I knew there was an interest for programming for the younger children."

"Doodle Bugs" programs are popular because of their specific focus on topics of interest to young children. Hands-on experiences are also important in making the activities unique and meaningful for kids.

"I try to focus on topics that are of interest to this age range, exposing the participants to things they may never get to experience, such as feeling a real dinosaur bone or seeing a real bat up close," Deatherage said. "How many people can say they have had their hand in a bear's mouth or felt a skunk?"

Deatherage said she especially enjoys working with young children because of their genuine excitement and love of learning new things.

"I thoroughly enjoy working with the 'Doodle Bugs' program because it is so fulfilling to see the look in the kids' eyes when they see something new or learn a cool fact," Deatherage said. "Children this age are like sponges, taking in everything, and they love learning new things. It is important to instill an appreciation of nature at this age, so it will lead to a lifelong appreciation and respect."

Upcoming "Doodle Bugs" programs include:

Animal Homes, on February 22, where participants will learn about how and why animals build homes, from birds and beavers, to bees and wasps.

Rumbling Rainforest, on March 29, which will focus on tropical rainforests, including where they are located and what typical animals and plants live there.

Incredible Insects, on April 26, which will include a bug hunt outside the museum, along with the making of a cool insect craft that kids can take home.

"Doodle Bugs" programs are each one-hour long, from 10 – 11 a.m. and 3 – 4 p.m. The cost is \$3 per child, and children must be accompanied by an adult. For more information, contact Christy Deatherage, museum education coordinator, at 276-666-8636, or cdeatherage@vmnh.net.

ABOUT THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

The Virginia Museum of Natural History in Martinsville seeks to increase understanding of and appreciation for the natural history of the Commonwealth through education, research, collections, publications and exhibits. The museum – an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution – is accredited by the American Association of Museums, a distinction earned by fewer than 10 percent of museums in the United States. A new, \$28 million museum currently is being built in Martinsville. When fully completed in early 2007, the new museum will offer five times the exhibit and public space of the current facility.

The museum is a member of the Association of Science-Technology Centers, Virginia Association of Museums, Heritage Preservation, and an agency of the Secretary of Natural Resources for the Commonwealth of Virginia. With 22 million objects in its collection, it reaches nearly 1 million people annually through on-site and traveling exhibitions, classroom outreach programs, the museum's Web site, public events and publications.

The museum is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m. Members are always admitted free. Admission is \$5 for adults; \$4 for senior citizens and youth 12-18; \$3 for children 3 to 11; and free for children 2 and under. For more information about membership or volunteer opportunities, please call 276-666-8600 or visit the museum's Web site at www.vmnh.net.

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Doodle Bugs participants look at a bug during a recent program.



Wanda Slaughter watches proudly as her granddaughter, Kassidy, makes a snowflake during a Doodle Bugs program.