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**News Article**

**Science Quest For Roxbury Youth**

**The snowflake and the computer**

By Paul Flynn

**Posted Jun 21, 2002**

It was enlightening to come to know the Science Quest Project sponsored by the Cruz Computer Learning Center that is managed by Laurie Sparrowhawk and located across from Dudley Street Station on Washington Street.



Eight preteen students named Chrishara, Chrismely, Geneeka, Marquis, Sammy, Sarah, and Taiwana (known as 'Kiwi' to her friends) came from the surrounding neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan –or as the group likes to put it, "America"—to sign up for a ten week program in technology that met every Tuesday from February through May.

The main project for the group was to create a website for the two topics they chose to research: snowflakes and computers. Specifically, what makes the former form and fall, and how are the latter put together and what makes them work. Though it was February, they had a bit of a wait to see snowflakes fall, but during the wait, they got to field-strip a computer to see the "hows" and "whys" of what makes them work by identifying all of its parts. (The group's experiences can be read on their Website: <http://library.thinkquest.org/S00110400>)

"The snowflake and the computer", and if our national poet laureate, Mr. Pinsky, is reading, I think he could detect a little competition on the horizon. In the absence of snow falling outside, the kids decided to transform some of the science of it into an artistic project. No two snowflakes being identically alike, the group created its own snowfall out of shaping straws into such snowflakes and cutting them out of paper. Significantly, the students confessed that all this transcended what was possible at their regular classes at school. Then the group exclaimed unequivocally, "That's why we like it!"

The science project culminated in a field trip to the Interactive Media Festival at MIT that opened another door on yet other things that are not possible in their regular school classes. This festival allows the visitor to explore many sound and image devices in development at this MIT lab: Play doh, drum synthesizers, fruit sticks made of cantaloupe and honeydew melons that when touched play music; a magic carpet that you can dance on and watch yourself doing it at the same time. Even Mozart's "Magic Flute" shows up in the form of a xylophone, and the Shadow Room that captured Sarah's imagination, as each time it took her picture, she could see her shadow projected on the wall.

Each student, of course, had his or her favorite exhibit, but to Chrishara, it was the Ball in a Maze that was "different from other things". This exhibit gripped the attention of most and, as well, provided most of the student participation. The idea is to stand on a 6 ft. by 6 ft. pad that has the image of a maze on it, and then a ball—which you are to get through the maze—appears. Things then activate, and you must step deftly back and forth and side to side, because as the motion of the ball progresses, a hole sporadically pops up and you must shift your weight to and fro' to prevent the ball from hitting and thereby falling into the hole. If that occurs, it is game over and you lose! In that regard, Kiwi's major project became, as she put it, "messing people up". She did this by cleverly placing her foot on the electronically sensitized pad just as one of her friends was in the middle of negotiating a safe course through the maze.

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Such a day made of magic carpets and flutes, of play doh drums and mazes, could only end up for these kids at McDonald's. (It is the next Science Quest that they study cholesterol.) Where, and ever so crucial to any theory of education, to its techniques and applications, each student shared his or her experiences with one another and their two coaches, Jeff Juell and Chande Pearman, both of whom have excellent backgrounds in information technology. How are they paid? Hear it loud and clear from Chrishera, Chrimely, Geneeka, Marquis, Sammy, Sarah, Shakeel, and Kiwi: "It's fun!" The kids get a free lunch and the coaches get to pay for it. As for the rest, it is called volunteering.

Pondering the implications of all this, my own brain becomes an interactive media exhibit of its own. First shadows, then images and sounds—all cascade, one against the other, and then from afar, I hear echoes of a show that seems to be in progress. Yes, I hear a distinct voice now. Why it is the voice from "This American Life", a program that comes over National Public Radio, hosted by Ira Glass—in fact, the voice is that of Ira Glass himself. He apparently has been interviewing a few congressman and national experts on education, and he seems to be summing up what he has heard from these guests:

-Wait, did I hear you all right? You're in essence saying that you, this society, has thirty-two thousand dollars to incarcerate a teenager for some non-violent related drug offence. And that your national correctional system—right as we speak—in fact incarcerates a million of just such offenders. But you can't come up with a sawbuck when it comes to sending a kid on a science field trip, because, because you say that you have to see results. You'd have to see how it would affect their MCAS scores. And so you'd definitely require a study on that. I hope you'll forgive me, and I apologize if I'm reading into this, but you almost seem to be saying that these type of field trips and other projects are not available in the nation's educational system because the system is not geared or even instrumental in providing any kind of education, but rather that 'education' is based—not on acquiring such, but rather on performance. Specifically, a student's performance score on an arbitrary test that also is applied arbitrarily that you call the MCAS test. I mean did you ever think of a subtle change in the acronym—from MCAS to MAI or mutually assured ignorance. I mean this is all crazy! It's its own satire. There isn't a satirist alive today who could have come up with this. But really the satirical technique is actually quite simple, as you merely combine Orwellian terms and apply them to education. Thus, your educational system could be called, not MCAS, but "Non-think-Double-Think-No-Brainer"—because there's no brain there. Maybe...maybe you could simply call the education system, THORAZINE. But I'll have to re-double-think, no-think that.

And that is where the voice in my head ended.