**PaleoFest 2024**

March is almost upon us, and with that comes the Burpee Museum of Natural History’s biggest event of the year. PaleoFest is an event that originated at Burpee over 25 years ago, and we have been running it ever since, even virtually during the COVID shutdown.

What is PaleoFest, you ask? PaleoFest brings paleontologists from across the globe to Rockford for one weekend to share their research and studies with the public. We have 16 speakers spread over two days, as well as a Keynote Dinner Speaker on Saturday evening.

Along with the lectures by the scientists, Burpee's education staff works tirelessly to bring fun for kids and adults alike by offering workshops, paleoart demonstrations, and Paleo Passport stations set up throughout the museum. Each passport station focuses on some aspect of paleontology, which could include models and casts of dinosaur bones as well as real ones, or a hands-on activity for the kids. After visiting each station, kids can get their passport stamped. Once all the stamps have been collected, they can redeem the passport for a prize.

One of the coolest things about PaleoFest is the willingness of the scientists to mingle and chat with the visitors. Many kids and students, myself included, have “heroes” in the field. When I was a kid, Jack Horner, Bob Bakker, and Paul Sereno were my heroes. I saw them on TV programs, read articles about them in magazines, and read their books routinely, trying to soak up as much information about dinosaurs as possible. It was not until I was a 25-year-old graduate student that I found myself volunteering in the Paleo Lab at Burpee and sitting in the same room having a conversation with the very people I looked up to as a kid. It was a surreal experience at the time and one that was fostered by PaleoFest.

Over the 25 years that the museum has been hosting PaleoFest, we have carved out our spot within the field of paleontology. Over that time, hundreds of paleontologists, representing all aspects of paleontology (not just dinosaurs) have taken the stage at PaleoFest to present their groundbreaking research, sometimes for the very first time to the Rockford community. When I travel to the annual Society of Vertebrate Paleontology meetings each year, I am always approached by many of my colleagues asking to be invited as a speaker at PaleoFest. It is a feather in our cap to hear and listen to these world-renowned scientists speak so highly of an event founded by our “little” museum, many of whom routinely end up in documentaries and TV shows about dinosaurs.

Students come from all over attend PaleoFest in hopes of picking the brains of the scientists and often looking for potential college or graduate school advisors. On the academic side of paleontology, I have found that while studying and learning as much as you can is very important, networking is just as important. Had it not been for PaleoFest and the introductions that were made during these events, I would not have made the connections that I have today and certainly would not be sitting as the lead paleontologist at Burpee 25 years later. It is quite a feat that such distinguished scientists and students look forward to this event every year it continues to draw massive crowds.

Some of the proudest moments I have are when I see paleontology students, undergraduate and graduate, in the crowd who started coming to PaleoFest as children and have followed their passion and dream of one day becoming a paleontologist themselves. I cannot thank the dedicated visitors enough who show up year after year to support the Burpee Museum and PaleoFest in our pursuit to bring fossils to life through the eyes of the scientists that are studying them.

PaleoFest has become so celebrated that many institutions have started using PaleoFest as a model for their own programs. It is becoming quite common to see these events popping up across the country, spearheaded by paleontologists who first experience the event as a speaker. With our 26th PaleoFest right around the corner, I am excited to see our dedicated visitors return and look forward to introducing my colleagues to our wonderful museum!