

## It's a balloon. It's a bridge. No, it's NanoDays!



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The steering committee of the Nanoscale Informal Science Education (NISE) Network hunkered down in a San Francisco hotel room following the Network's first annual meeting in 2006, to analyze our progress along a carefully planned strategic roadmap. Our mission was to build the capacity of the nation's science museums to engage public audiences in one of the most important emerging research fields of our time – nanotechnology – a field that one day, with careful stewardship, could help us better diagnose and cure disease, produce a sustainable energy economy, and achieve a quantum leap in computing power.

Our roadmap made sense; we were on track. We were deep into the collaborative journey: involving dozens of exhibit designers and educators in learning about nanotechnology; harnessing their creative expertise in designing engaging and effective out-of-the-classroom educational experiences; testing these through a growing network of science museums; and ultimately reaching their large and diverse audiences. Clearly, this process was going to take some time. We had 5 years of funding from the National Science Foundation, but beyond that, we couldn't be certain there would even be a NISE Network. How could we complement our long-term strategy of building capacity 'from the ground up' with a more immediate splash of color and attention that could energize a lot of organizations and a lot of people in a short amount of time?

*NanoDays*. The idea floated in a cartoon thought balloon just above our heads in that hotel room near the Golden Gate Bridge. Even so, we were loathe to channel it out of the air and tether it to the landscape of our roadmap. We had all been through years of specially marked calendar days for science, some flush with public attention, others marked by only varying degrees of local enthusiasm. Success would require an enormous effort to get the

word out and rally people around a set of difficult and abstract-seeming concepts. Who cared about nano? Who even knew what it was, besides a prefix for a smallish iPod? Why make a big deal about something so small it can't even be seen; with, as yet, so few tangible applications? Who – or what – could serve as the inspirational 'poster child' for nano? Worst of all, what if we announced *NanoDays*, and nobody came? The *NanoDays* balloon hovered



Drawing by Jeanne Antill.

in the brilliant sunshine of our minds; we lingered in the fog of the Embarcadero, hesitant to take the leap. But then we did.

*NanoDays 2008* was launched with low expectations but great energy. It surprised us beyond even the hopeful prognostications we had made to NSF. We had planned to ship 40 *NanoDays* kits (banners, demonstration supplies, tools, and guides), but soon upped the number to 100, with additional downloadable digital kits coming online to meet

demand in the last weeks before launch. Suddenly, you could find websites in Montana and Puerto Rico announcing open houses and festive family activities at research facilities, universities, and science museums. When the reports and photos started pouring in, we learned that *NanoDays* had sparked moments of nano awareness for tens of thousands of folks in 41 states and territories. Perhaps more importantly, *NanoDays* involved staff at about 100 organizations in doing hands-on nano education and outreach, and it opened the door for many new science museum – research center partnerships. *NanoDays 2008* worked. *NanoDays 2009* has just now ended with even greater success. Kits went out to over 220 sites; many partnering organizations produced their own locally-grounded programs and activities; in addition, the NISE Network now has a growing catalog of programs and exhibits from which to draw.

In retrospect, it was a no-brainer. With public and private funding pouring into nanoscale research of all types, there is no shortage of scientists and engineers eager to share their new materials and devices, their stories and their dreams. With *NanoDays*, the NISE Network succeeded in providing a focus, a festive atmosphere, a bridge between communities of educators and researchers, and – with the kits – a way to crystallize some of nano's big abstract ideas into tangible hands-on activities that could help to catalyze further inquiry.

Meanwhile, we are still motoring along that strategic roadmap with a growing caravan of colleagues, intent on building a deeper and more sustainable culture for future nanoscale science awareness and education.

See [www.nisenet.org](http://www.nisenet.org) for more information. *NanoDays 2010* will be March 27 – April 4.