

Of Special Interest

Ten Years of Slime: The National Chemistry Week Success Story!

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*... “chemistry is
everywhere, and
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What started in 1987 as National Chemistry Day, a one-time celebration of the contributions of chemistry to society, has evolved into a annual, week-long collection of creative and educational activities that highlight the importance of chemistry in daily life. National Chemistry Week (NCW), an outreach program of the American Chemical Society, reaches over 10 million members of the general public with positive messages about chemistry. Demonstrations, hands-on activities, contests, games, workshops, open houses, classroom visits, and lectures are some of the many activities used to impress upon the general public that chemistry is all around us. Examples of creative and successful NCW activities are described and information about getting involved in NCW is provided.

National Chemistry Week (NCW), an outreach program of the American Chemical Society (ACS), is celebrated each year



during the first full week of November. In 1995, all 187 local sections (chapters) of the ACS, along with industrial chemists, teachers, and students across the United States, conducted NCW activities that reached over 10 million members of the general public with positive messages about chemistry.

NCW was the vision of Dr. George C. Pimentel, former president of the ACS, the world's largest scientific society. Dr. Pimentel proposed holding a simultaneous, nationwide program to impress upon the public the important contributions chemists and chemistry make to society. ACS members in their local sections took up Dr. Pimentel's challenge and initiated a wide range of grassroots programs promoting the idea that chemistry is all around us.

The types of events conducted during National Chemistry Day (NCD) promoted informal science education and were numerous and varied. Local sections held chemistry-related poster contests for elementary school children, performed liquid-nitrogen demonstrations at shopping centers, constructed periodic tables made from cupcakes, and polymerized a huge amount of slime (polyvinyl alcohol and borax).

Ensuing years have seen the steady growth of the program in terms of both participation and venues. In 1995, NCW volunteers performed over 5000 hands-on activities and



3000 chemical demonstration shows for the general public. NCW events have been held at sites ranging from schools, museums, and libraries to parks, shopping malls, football stadiums, and zoos.

The growth of National Chemistry Week is also reflected by the increase in media coverage of NCW events. Last year over 400 articles featuring NCW appeared in newspapers across the country and one-third of the local ACS sections received television or radio coverage of their NCW programs. On a national scale, television weatherman Willard Scott made several mentions of National Chemistry Week during his morning weather segments on the NBC "Today" program.

In addition, President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore wrote letters lauding the goals of National Chemistry Week. President Clinton wrote, "Discoveries in chemistry over the past century have given us a greater understanding of the way the universe works, from the smallest cell in the ocean to the greatest star in the heavens. Chemistry is a fascinating field of study, and our future commitment to this important science can ensure America's long-term success and leadership in the world."

The American Chemical Society provides written materials and promotional products to help local sections and individuals conduct successful NCW activities. Still, the program is truly grassroots in nature, with local sections and individuals customizing activities of interest within their own communities.

For example, volunteers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana initiated a “science passport project” in order to link students, parents, teachers, industrial scientists, and the local mall in a community celebration of NCW. Area elementary school students were invited to visit the local mall during NCW to perform hands-on chemistry experiments at nine different “passport stations.” Over 2000 people participated in the event in which passports were stamped when visitors successfully completed an experiment. In addition to learning about chemistry and having fun, students could return their completed and stamped passports to their teachers for extra credit.



The Kalamazoo local ACS section developed National Chemistry Week placemats that highlighted the importance of chemistry in daily life. The placemats were distributed to local restaurants for use during NCW. In Memphis, a high school honors chemistry class celebrated NCW by cross-stitching a king-size “Periodic Table of the Elements” quilt for their chemistry teacher. Each student researched the origin, properties, and applications of the elements they stitched.

Members of the local ACS section in Omaha, Nebraska combined their demonstration and acting talents to perform “A Melodious Musichemical Manifestation” an evening of chemistry demonstrations done entirely to music. The show, with an audience of 500, culminated in a finale to the 1812 Overture during which 11 hydrogen-filled balloons were exploded in 22 seconds, mimicking the cannon blasts in the song.

Although education and fun are important components in the celebration of NCW, safety is one of its most often stressed themes. The ACS Division of Chemical Education, Incorporated has developed a list of minimum safety guidelines for chemical demonstrations, which is available from the ACS.

The real success of National Chemistry Week has been due to the dedication, hard work, and creativity of its many volunteers, who want to share the simple message “chemistry is everywhere, and the contributions chemistry has made to society have made our lives better!”



There are many materials available to help first-time NCW participants. If you are interested in finding out more about NCW, call 1-800-227-5558 and press 976097#, or write to the National Chemistry Week Office, c/o American Chemical Society, 1155 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036; or email to ncw@acs.org.