

Nature, fine arts, agriculture and astronomy touched 35,000 students last year

By Bill Fallon



Stamford Museum and Nature Center CEO/Executive Director Melissa Mulrooney. Photo by Bill Fallon

John Keats said truth is beauty and beauty is truth and on Friday, June 19, Stamford marks 80 years of getting that simple equation right with a celebration at the Stamford Museum and Nature Center.

A person could be forgiven for thinking Keats penned the lines exclusive to the SMNC on Scofield Town Road, which last year attracted 200,000 visitors to its bounty of aesthetics, astronomy, agriculture and old-growth forest.

Sixteen of the site's 118 acres are tilled organically as a working New England farm from about 100 years ago featuring heirloom crops, sheep and cattle. As Stamford's municipal

fine-art home, the SMNC is home to works by Mount Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum and Borglum's fellow local sculpture Reuben Nakian, who died in Stamford in 1986. Trails weave through 80 acres of forest and watershed. The cosmos is available through the SMNC observatory's 22-inch research telescope; Friday nights are for the public. The museum and its administrative offices up the aesthetic quotient by occupying the stone mansion of fashion retailer Henri Bendel.

A Reuben Nakian bronze is to the left of the museum's front door. It is one of many sculptures along the on-site art trail. Melissa Mulrooney, the museum's executive director and CEO, ticked off museums that count Nakians among their collections, including New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"We're a very large repository for the works of Gutzon Borglum and Reuben Nakian," she said. "It's great we have these two great artists at the head of our collection."

Mulrooney, who has 10 years at her post, spent an hour recently discussing the museum's programs and history, including its successful Business Affiliates Membership Program that has attracted 25 companies, corporations, firms and a foundation (Xerox Foundation) and that is headed in the top tier by Aquarion Water Co., First County Bank, Purdue Pharma L.P. and Reckson, a Division of SL Green Corp.



The on-site Art, Nature and Me Pre-School educates 134 tuition-paying students. Photo by Bill Fallon

The museum's annual operating budget is \$3.6 million. Mulrooney said it raises about 66 percent of that sum through the likes of admission – there were 200,000 visitors last year – and through fundraisers and by hosting events. "The businesses of the SMNC – what we do to bring in income – are very important," she said. "But we also rely on corporate sponsors and the business community to be involved with us in a profound way."

She said that since the Business Affiliates initiative launched in 2009, "We've pretty much doubled corporate support." She said the companies that sign on have shared values in education and with the environment and gain by aligning their brands with the museum's brand. "Aquarion, for example, has been a terrific environmental partner," she said.

The SMNC employs 25 full time. Those ranks swell to 72 seasonally. Both on site and through its traveling programs, Mulrooney said the museum instructs 35,000 students per year, about half of them from Stamford. Its catchment area incorporates the in-

county-triangle of Greenwich, Stratford and Danbury, plus increasingly Westchester County, N.Y.

The site offers a smorgasbord of company and private-party opportunities, including for 150 guests (dining and dancing) in the Bendel Mansion, for 100 picnic guests on the grounds, for wedding photos and for weddings themselves. Corporate partners get a discount. Whoever uses the facility, Mulrooney said, "They're dazzled."

For more information, contact events manager Cate Carlucci, ccarlucci@stamfordmuseum.org.

Read More: <http://westfaironline.com/75736/nature-fine-arts-agriculture-and-astronomy-touched-35000-students-last-year/>