

Holding human brains 'mindblowing' experience in Detroit



By Robert Allen, Detroit Free Press 7:25 p.m. EDT March 21, 2015



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(Photo: Robert Allen Detroit Free Press)

Six-year-old Molly Moffett smiled as she poked a human brain on a table Saturday at the Michigan Science Center in Detroit.

A first-year medical student, Niles Raval, 22, gingerly grabbed the brain like a football and handed it to the girl from St. Clair Shores.

"It's about 3 pounds," he told Molly. "Everything you think about, everything you want to do: It all starts in your brain."

Molly quietly listened as Raval explained more about how brains work. Her mother, Melissa Moffett, said the kindergartner "loves to learn," and it was her first time visiting the science center.

The anatomy lesson was offered as part of Brain Day, an annual nationwide science event aimed at educating kids on the workings of gray matter as well as showing off recent technology and recruiting potential subjects for research.

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A human brain on display Saturday at Brain Day at Michigan Science Center in Detroit. (Photo: Robert Allen Detroit Free Press)

Thomas Fischer, Wayne State University associate professor of psychology, said it's fascinating that in recent years scientists have been able to examine even the brain of a fetus in the womb. An MRI machine used to examine brains was among the attractions on display Saturday at the event, and brain images were displayed on a projection screen.

Students from undergraduate to graduate and medical school, mostly from Wayne State and University of Detroit Mercy, were involved in Saturday's event, which drew numerous curious children. Fischer said this is a chance for the students to get out of the lab and see the people for whom they're doing research.

"It's part of their education to have to learn how to talk to the public," he said.

David Brush, 23, who has been a lab coordinator at the WSU Institute of Gerontology but is on his way to the University of Central Florida to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology, has been working on a brain-imaging study with children ages 5 to 17.

"One of the most important things we're looking at is memory and how they develop it through their lifespan," he said.

Brush said the subjects get excited to see the images taken of their brains. One of the aims of the brain studies has been to detect any differences in

brain development in 5- to 7-year-olds who were born prematurely versus full-term. He and other students shared information about the studies, as well as information pamphlets on brain disorders and more, with families who stopped by their booth.

Back at the brain table, Raval said that first moment he held a human brain — when he started medical school last August — was the "most mind-blowing experience I've had."

He grinned as he offered that experience, and some pieces of his own brain's knowledge, to kids.

The brains came from cadavers used by the medical school, from people who'd donated their bodies to science.

Other Brain Day attractions included reaction-time tests, and an egg-breaking exercise to learn about head protection.

The event was hosted by neuroscientists from WSU and the University of Detroit Mercy and was included among exhibits at the bustling science center on Saturday.

Contact Robert Allen at rallen@freepress.com or [@rallenMI](http://www.twitter.com/rallenMI) (<http://www.twitter.com/rallenMI>)

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