

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Contact:
Natasha Smith-Walker
773.307.4419

National Leader in STEM Youth Education Celebrates 25 Years of Changing the Face of Science in Chicago

Project Exploration, an award-winning, nationally recognized leader in transformative science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) youth education will celebrate its 25th Anniversary at the Bridgeport Art Center in Chicago on June 20th. The event will bring together alumni, scientists and families to commemorate its trailblazing achievements.

Annually, Project Exploration serves nearly 700 Chicago Public School youth kindergarten through 12th grade in neighborhoods with limited access to STEM programs with personalized, hands-on experiences. Founded in 1999 Project Exploration has been at the forefront of making STEM education accessible to all and serving as a leader nationally for engaging historically underserved youth of color and girls.

"We couldn't be more thrilled to be gathering with student alumni, scientists and families on this extraordinary anniversary," said Executive Director Natasha Smith Walker. "People are coming from all over the country to reunite and celebrate."

In 2010 a [10-year evaluation](#) by researchers at Berkeley found Project Exploration students were **3x more likely** to enroll in a four-year college, and **over one-third** went on to major in STEM fields. That same year Project Exploration was identified as a national model for leveling the playing field in science by the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. That same year Project Exploration received a Presidential Award from President Obama for Excellence in Science Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring.

"Project Exploration is a bridge between young people least likely to have access to science and passionate scientists eager to share their curiosity. The mission of Project Exploration is, literally, to change the face of science," said founding executive director, Gabrielle Lyon. "Given that we focus on young people who are also primarily the first people in their family to attend college, these findings and recognition meant there was something important and special about our program from its earliest days. And the program is stronger than ever," said Lyon.

Alongside deeply local programs which use a relationship-based model to stay connected with young people over many years, Project Exploration catalyzed the launch a national movement for Science in Out of School Time by hosting the first national conference for youth and science education in Chicago, publishing "Discover Your Summer," an annual national directory for summer science opportunities before the internet was widely available to young people, and, by creating the (still active) [Chicago STEM Pathways Cooperative](#). An annual "STEM Signing Day" takes place to celebrates CPS students who will pursue STEM degrees at the nation's top colleges, universities and 2- year colleges. During the pandemic, Project Exploration expanded its reach by 300% by

activating a STEM van to distribute hands-on kits and providing online programming and academic support.

"The model makes the difference. Our programs deeply engage students in authentic STEM experiences alongside mentors and STEM professionals who serve as role models. The relationships are the lynch pin for supporting youth to develop critical social and emotional skills, such as self-confidence, science identity, collaboration, communication, and leadership abilities. We are not only proud of what we've accomplished, we're looking forward to the next 25 years and what we can do for Chicago's young people," said Natasha Smith Walker.

The 25th Anniversary fundraiser is being supported by lead sponsors Amazon, Boeing and Verizon. Honorees include funders, scientists and teachers who have had an indelible impact on the organization and its mission. These include the Albert Pick, Jr. Fund, Brinson Foundation, Gerald A. & Karen A. Kolschowsky Foundation, Sara & Two C-Dogs Foundation, The Boeing Company, The Siragusa Family Foundation, Chicago Park District, Chicago Public Schools, Lincoln Park Zoo, Northwestern University OCEP, Rush Education and Career Hub, Shedd Aquarium. Notable scientists receiving awards include Sean Carroll, PhD, and Lisa Gilbert, MS. Notably, the evening will include recognition of program alumni who have made significant strides in their STEM careers and have become inspiring role models for the next generation. These alumni include Tommie Collins III, MDes, MBA, Uzziel Fernandez, Shureice Kornegay, Marco Mendez, Michael A. Ramirez, and Elena Schroeter, PhD.

+++++++

About Project Exploration: Project Exploration is a Chicago-based nonprofit science education and youth development organization launched in 1999 to address inequities in access to high-quality STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) opportunities in out-of-school time. With equity at our core, we serve youth from communities historically underrepresented in STEM fields and recruit students who are curious and interested in science but face systemic challenges to accessing high-quality programs, such as academic prerequisites or program fees.

For more information, please visit www.projectexploration.org.