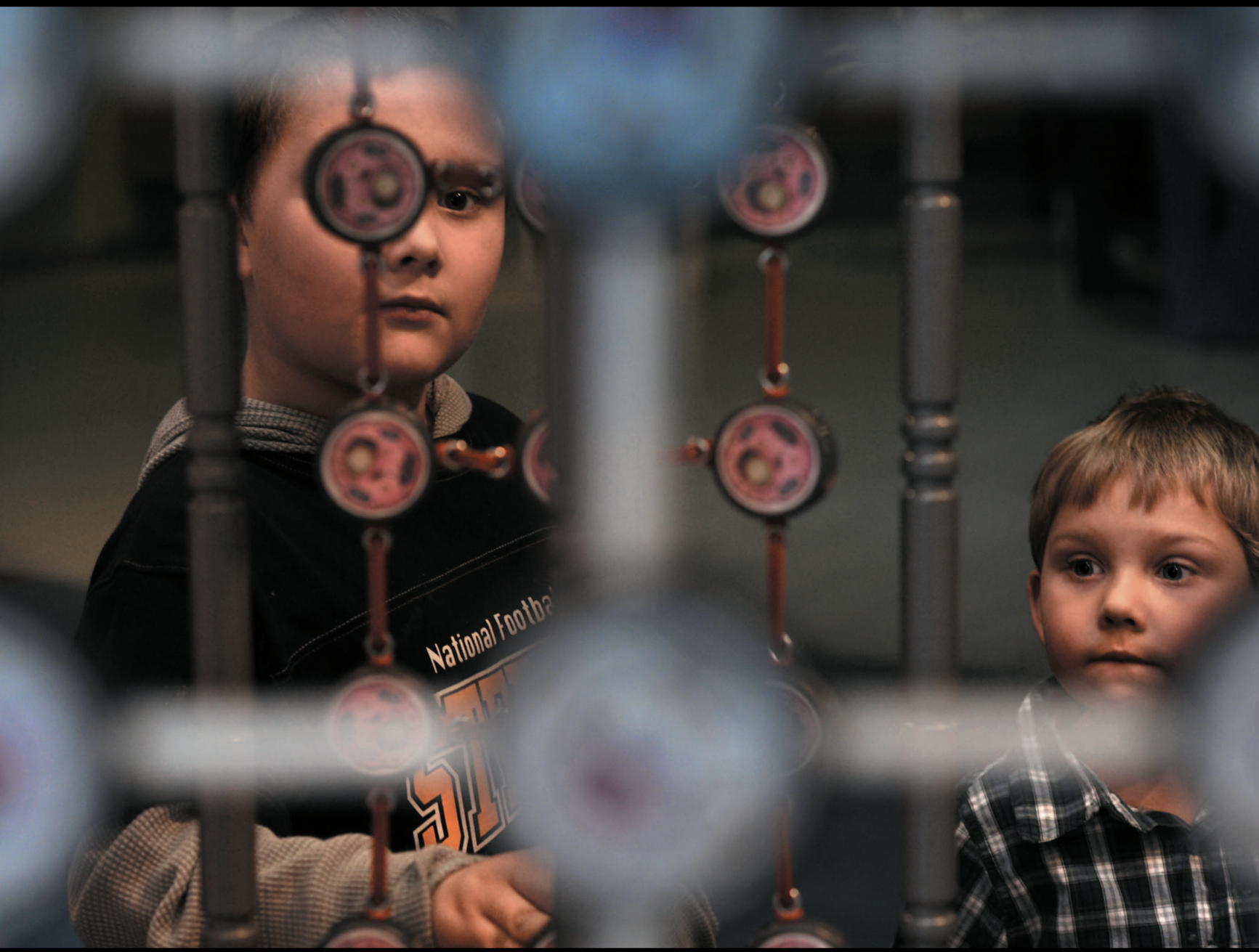


A HUNKA-HUNKA REGENERATING STARFISH

An Elvis impersonator has been hired to inspire future generations in the fields of tissue engineering and regenerative medicine. Something about him is a little fishy, though.

This Elvis, whose real name is Seamore, is less a hunka-hunka burning love than a cartoon starfish with Presley's patented coif and shades. He explains regeneration from personal experience at the Carnegie Science Center's new exhibit, "If a Starfish Can Grow a New Arm, Why Can't I?"

The exhibit was funded by a Science Education Partnership Award from the National Center for Research Resources. Its creators gleaned much of the content from work at the University of Pittsburgh–UPMC McGowan Institute for Regenerative Medicine. One activity island helps visitors understand the basics of cell structure with a cell puzzle and twisting skin and bone cell matrices. Older students tend to gravitate toward another island with video games that simulate aspects of tissue engineering. Nearby are two monitors where visitors can learn about clinical applications, take an ethics quiz, or record opinions on stem cell research.

One Friday, a small group of elementary school students ran to touch-screen computers that offered Q&As from scientists, including Joon Sup Lee, an MD associate professor of medicine at Pitt and clinical director of the Cardiovascular Institute at UPMC. Though a surgical scene drew a wrinkled nose and an "Ew!" from an energetic girl in a Jonas Brothers T-shirt, her teacher remained fixated on the video through the end. He summarized: "You see how the starfish can grow a new arm? That's what they're trying to do with people's body parts."

Meanwhile, three boys stood at the zoetrope, a round drum with slats revealing progressive images of the regeneration of a newt's leg. "You're spinning it too fast," said one, as he slowed the drum to the proper speed to give the illusion of animation.

Seamore has a long career ahead of him: He is packing his sequined jumpsuit and heading on tour. A replica of the exhibit will appear in eight other science centers through 2013.

—Tiffani Emig

—Photo by Martha Rial