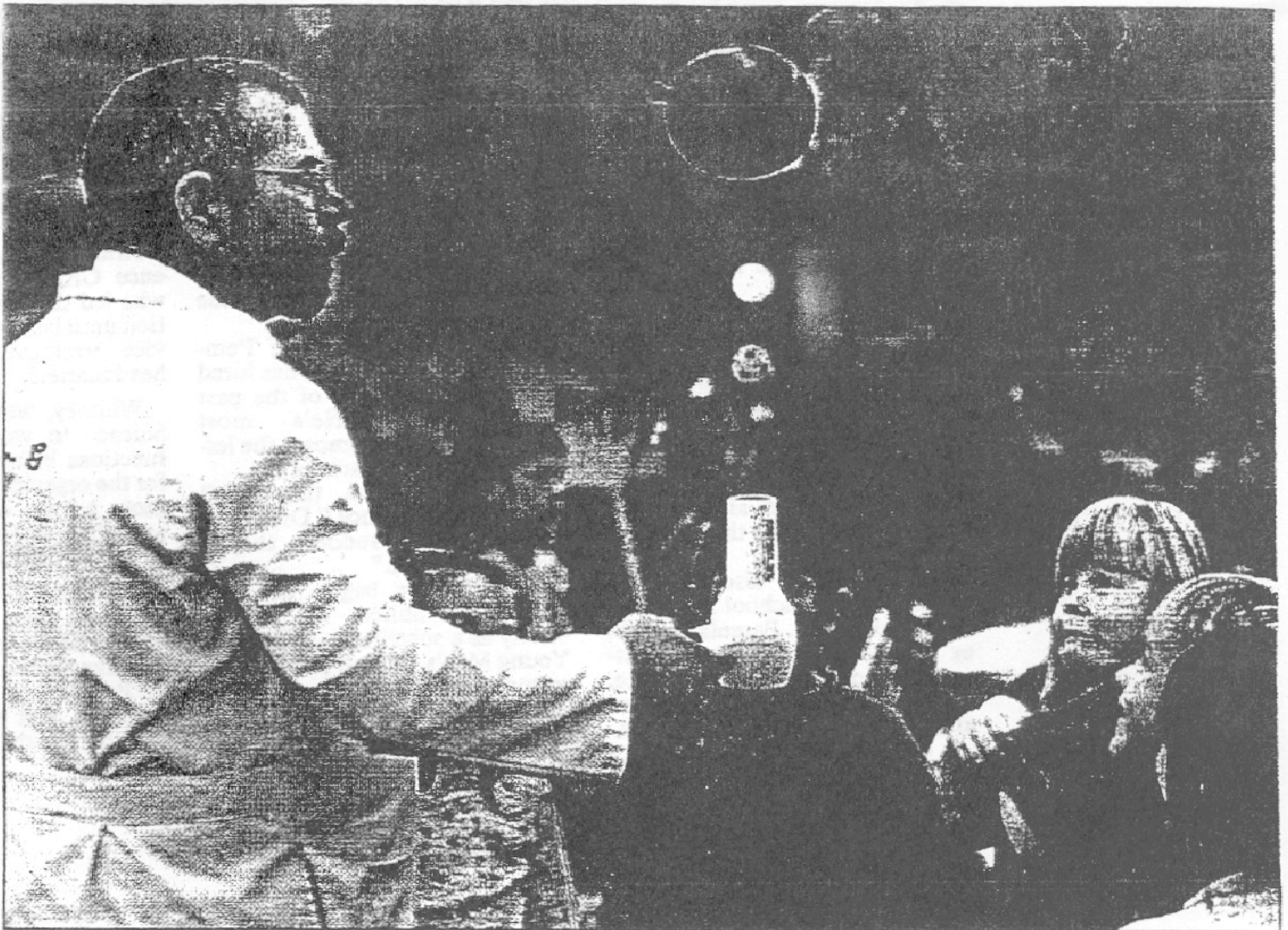


AIR-RAISING STUNT



J. ALBERT DIAZ / Herald Staff

SCIENTIFIC FEAT: Mad Science's Galen Stephenson, a.k.a. Dr. G., shows first-graders at Pembroke Pines Elementary how a stream of hot air from a hair dryer keeps objects — in this case balloons and ping-pong balls — in suspension.

Mad Science: A new formula for fun

By **DANIEL de VISE**
Herald Staff Writer

A Diet Coke can that crumples before your eyes. Ping-pong balls that float on air. Balloons that seem to inflate themselves.

The first-graders at Pembroke Pines Elementary School had never known science so cool.

"Watch: I can move your hair," said Galen Stephenson, an instructor with Mad Science of South Florida.

Dressed in a white lab coat bearing the embroidered monogram "Dr. G.," Stephenson strolled around a first-grade classroom on a recent morning. He clutched a plastic flowerpot with a hole at the bottom and a balloon stretched over the top. Pulling on the balloon and then releasing it, he sent a gust of air whooshing out the hole and through each child's hair.

First-graders at Pembroke Pines Elementary School never realized science could be so cool.

This, he explained, is air pressure.

"Now, do you know what it's called when you don't have any air?"

Stephenson affixed a pump to a two-liter soda bottle and sucked out all the air, leaving a slab of twisted plastic. A vacuum.

At this, one boy literally fell out of his chair with delight. "Do it again!" several others shouted.

Launched 13 years ago by a pair of Montreal high school students, Mad Science now

incorporates 72 franchises worldwide. Its base remains in Canada, but the largest Mad Science franchise is in Hallandale.

Mad Science of South Florida is owned and operated by Dawn Whitney, 27, who bought the franchise last May. Most of her business experience came from leading her own Mad Science lessons and, before that, working for the Girl Scouts.

"If you look back to your favorite teacher in high school, it was probably the one who entertained while they were

teaching," Whitney said.

Her staff of 19 leads hourlong workshops in elementary- and middle-school classrooms around Broward, Dade and Palm Beach counties and in the Keys. For a cost of \$4 or \$5 per child, paid by the school, a Mad Scientist in a lab coat runs a session that is part magic show, part science fair.

In the Pembroke Pines classroom, children pondered such quandaries as why a limp balloon weighs less than one filled with air (because air has weight) and why a heated Diet Coke can crumples when placed top-down in cool water (because the air inside the can contracts as it cools).

For one of Stephenson's neater tricks, he balanced a ping-

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MAD SCIENCE, FROM 1BR

pong ball atop a jet of air rising from a hair dryer.

"Gravity is the force that pushes it down," he explained. "Air is the force that pushes it up."

Mad Science instructors review the lesson plans of local school districts and teach concepts that mesh with the work of classroom teachers. First-graders study air, air molecules and air pressure. Older children learn the theory of electricity.

The franchise also operates about 50 after-school programs across the region. Parents pay \$70 or \$80 per student for an eight-week session in hands-on science. And Mad Science staffers perform at civic events, restaurants, birth-

day parties and school assemblies.

Various activities have students making slime from common household items, creating clouds in a bottle or launching handmade rockets.

Principal John Drag of Pembroke Pines Elementary, has hired Mad Science in each of the past several years. He's most impressed with the impact the lessons have had on teachers.

"I have teachers, they don't want to touch science," Drag said. "And all of a sudden, they're dying to teach it."

Mad Science began in 1985 when Ariel Shlien, 16, worked briefly as a substitute teacher in a Young Men's Hebrew Association science program in Montreal and decided he could design a better class. He and his brother Ron

launched the company while in high school.

Ariel Shlien runs the Mad Science Group in Montreal. Ron who led the South Florida operation until last year, now works vice president at the corporate headquarters.

Whitney, who first hired Mad Science to work at Girl Scout functions before coming to work for the organization, hopes to promote a type of science education appealing to both genders. Eight of her 19 instructors are women.

She tailors lessons to both sexes. Boys, she said, are partial to science of dinosaurs. Girls prefer to make slime.

"People say, 'Girls don't want to touch that stuff,'" she said. "Yeah, they do."