Q&A with Jeffrey Rudolph
Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

Thirty-one years ago, Jeffrey Rudolph entered the science center and museum field “more or less by mistake.” Chance events led Rudolph, now president and CEO of the California Science Center (CSC) in Los Angeles and president of the California Science Center Foundation, to a storied career. That, in turn, earned him the ASTC Fellow Award for Outstanding Contribution, the Association’s highest honor, this year. Here, Rudolph reveals his favorite memories and his hopes for the future of the field.

Can you give me a brief—I know it’ll be hard—history of your career path in the field of science and technology?

How do I start? I guess I came into the field in 1982, more or less by mistake, because I was working for one of the state’s cabinet agencies, which happened to be the agency that the then–California Museum of Science and Industry was a part of when the then-director of the museum passed away suddenly, and the agency’s secretary asked me to come to L.A. for a while to keep on eye on things until they got a new director. That was 31 years ago.

And the rest is history!

I quickly fell in love with the concept of what could be done, but the California Museum of Science and Industry, for those who were around and knew it then, was not a great science center, certainly not for a city like L.A. and a state like California . . . so I was fortunate when about five years after that—I did stay as a deputy director before I was asked to become the CEO—to have great support from board, governor, state legislators to develop a new plan and really envision what a great science center for California, Los Angeles, could and should be, and develop a master plan that we’ve been working on ever since—[we] started in the late ‘80s on the plan, adopted it formally in 1993, and view it as a 25-year plan to create the California Science Center as a fantastic place for science learning, science education for people of all ages, special focus on Californians and particularly the community around the science center, which is a predominantly underserved community.

Could you tell me a bit of the specifics that have gone into your vision for the California Science Center?

We have three major components of the science center facility. There’s the public exhibit experience–based science center. There’s a neighborhood elementary school,
the California Science Center School, developed in partnership with the Los Angeles Unified School District. It serves as a model for integrating science, math, technology in a K–5 elementary school serving an underserved population where about two-thirds are Latino, a third are African American, of about 620 students in the school. We also have a center for science learning, which is really a center for our educational program but also a big focus on professional development for teachers and other educators—so we take what we do in the school and the science center and try to expand the reach through helping anyone who spends time with children learn how they can better incorporate science. So those are the three big components. We are well on our way to completing the plan in 25 years.

We’ve taken advantage of change and thinking and learning as we go, and I think I’ve taken advantage of great relationships with colleagues throughout the field—and I say that broadly, not just the science center field, but the whole museum field and the education field—to try to learn from others and adapt and do new things, be creative. We think that continuous improvement is important and that learning from research and evaluation about what we’ve done and what’s working well is important. And I keep mentioning a core value of believing that everyone can and should understand science, and we make a huge effort to ensure that our audience and our staff and our board and everything looks like the population of our region. So we work hard to maintain our free admission policy for general admission and to make sure everybody can use the place and benefit from it.

Over the past three decades, do you have one experience or accomplishment that you consider your biggest contribution or your favorite memory?

I’m going to say two things really stand out. I’m not sure I’d call them my biggest contribution. I like to think that in general that our contributions include everything from helping mentor and develop future leaders . . . and giving back in that way to the field and the organizations that help support the field, but also in terms of two big things at the California Science Center, I can pick out two. One really memorable and wonderful experience was the introduction of BODY WORLDS to the Americas and to the museum field, really. We were the first venue anywhere in the Western Hemisphere to host BODY WORLDS, and I think we were the first museum really to undertake that. And we did a lot of work on the ethics—display of real human specimens and bodies for this purpose, and that was certainly a memorable experience and one that we felt really good about the work that we’ve done with our community and religious and medical bioethicists and others to introduce it properly to this country.
The other thing which I think put everything else—is on a different scale from everything else and has been an incredible three-year ride the last few years is the getting Space Shuttle *Endeavour*. And it’s the experience of getting it—first of all, winning the award of *Endeavour* was tough enough but then to actually get it here, to bring it to and around the state of California and from the airport to L.A. was really something that became a source of pride for our whole community and a coming together of our whole community in a way that’s really hard to describe. We had not just the millions of people who looked up and saw it flying all over the state when it arrived and the million and a half people who lined the route for three days and three nights as it came from the airport, cheering and thanking us even though we were hours behind, but the whole community following us—and really beyond that, it was a worldwide phenomenon in some ways, but just to see the tremendous excitement all about something that was about science. And then tremendous crowds coming since then.

It’s been amazing. It’s also just the beginning because what we’ve done now is really just get it here and put it on display in a temporary display until we build our third phase of our master plan, which is our new air and space center, and will really give us an opportunity to do what we’re intrigued with now, which is using something real like the space shuttle, which has tremendous emotional impact on people and gets them involved, but using that combined with really good hands-on science and engineering exhibits to get people to think more deeply. And we’re using that and the other artifacts that we use in air and space in a very different way than a traditional air and space museum would. We’re using it as a science center would—much like we did with our *Ecosystems* [exhibition] that we opened a few years ago, where we brought living collections into our science center on a scale that’s not common in science centers and mixed that with the hands-on exhibits. We’re trying to learn from other museums in related fields and combine and develop some new models of how we can do things to engage the public’s interest.

More broadly, how have you seen the field (and ASTC) change over the past three decades?

Somewhat sadly, I’ll say. I think we’ve become much more established and with that, quite a lot less innovative. And I think that’s the nature of the world that if institutions get more established, they may be a little more conservative, but I think that we need to all take a little more risk and try new things more often.

Do you have any specific hopes for the field, for the near or far future?
I think there are a few big things. One is that I hope we continue to thrive and that we continue to attract new players, new people to the field itself, which will bring new energy and enthusiasm, and that we continue to focus on expanding the audience and serving everybody. I think that’s still a challenge in our community is to reach those that are traditionally underrepresented and uninterested in sciences. I think that we need to be willing to try new things, to perhaps join more with other types of institutions in doing things together—that’s always a challenge—but to look beyond our science center field and beyond talking to ourselves all the time, and bring in new ideas.

Is there anything I didn’t touch on that you’d like to add?

I’d probably add that it’s a tremendous honor to be recognized as a Fellow. And I’m not sure why me, but I think that it’s—from the first time I became a part of the field, it was always the welcoming of colleagues and the fact that we are so collegial and that people work together and support each other is really important, and I do hope that continues.