Our Celebration of Mind event was MAD MATH

Background:

The first time I attended a Gathering for Gardner I was blown away by the sculpture construction afternoon. I felt as though I was in another world, a theme park of mathematical delights. The event was pure mathematical happiness.

Years later, I wondered what effect a Gathering for Gardner–sort of event would have for the general public. So few people have experienced Gathering for Gardner. A mathematical wonderland, appearing at the right time, might be life-changing.

Mad Math was my attempt at this. The important features were:

1. It was mostly outdoors in the center of the Smith College campus.
2. Most events were physically large.
3. Most events were collaborative, calling on participants to work together.

Description:

We had a Soma cube puzzle constructed from cardboard boxes 30 inches on a side.

We had a huge sudoku puzzle.
We found balloons that were 50 feet long that could be twisted into polyhedra.

In the morning the sun was out, warming the air in the balloons. They rose.
One escaped.
Colm Mulcahey (Spelman College, Gathering for Gardner) was part of the team dazzling participants with magic tricks.

One event featured the construction of George Hart’s “Amazing Acrobats” sculpture, supplied by MoMath, the Museum of Mathematics.

Charlene Morrow (Mount Holyoke College) directed mathematical origami using sheets of paper 9 feet on a side.
We had a walk-in (or maybe crawl-in) Klein bottle.
Smith College has one of the few bell towers for change-ringing in the country. The bells are big; the largest is half a ton. We had a team of ringers hosting the participants.

We had a puzzle hunt.

We had SET cards projected on a wall.

We had singers wandering about singing canons and begging participants to join them.

We had a workshop in designing Nikoli-style puzzles.

We had tours of the mathematical art objects on campus.
Lessons Learned:

Our events were too spread out. To create the most magical environment, activities should be concentrated in the same area. For us this was difficult because of construction in the center of the campus.

Each event should have its own crew, managing things and cajoling passersby to join them.

We supplied lunch for all participants. I think that was actually a mistake. Food was a distraction. Urging people to bring sandwiches would be good. Having third parties selling sandwiches would be even better.

I wish we could have organized an exhibition/market of artisanal puzzles.

We intended to have a group cruising Mad Math urging participants to join them in creating human knots. That fell through at the last moment.

The date of Mad Math (October 20) was perfect for Celebration of Mind but a warmer, dryer time (there was a 30-minute torrential downpour in the afternoon) would have been better.

Jim Henle