Several UMD students manned the DNA Beads tables, where visitors created bracelets with their names in DNA codons. Children wrote out their names on small whiteboards. Underneath each letter of their name, they penned in the corresponding codon. Then, they strung adenine, guanine, cytosine, and thymine beads onto a bracelet, capped by a large turtle shell bead.

WHERE SCIENCE IS (EVERYWHERE!)

The UMD chapter of the American Society of Microbiology had several tents at the festival to educate visitors on the prevalence of microbes. Their most popular tent showcased rabies, Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA), E. coli, T4 Bacteriophage, and swine flu in a trivia game. Children and adults alike crowded around, hoping to win a coveted stuffed microbe by answering a question correctly. Student volunteers Kelly Klein and Vy Nguyen, both microbiology majors, assisted at the event.

Klein, who had only been working for an hour, was already sounding a little hoarse. “There are tons of children mobbing me for questions. They all want a microbe. I’ve even had college students who answer wrongly insist that they’re right. I just let them have a microbe.”

Nguyen, on the other hand, was really making people work for the stuffed toys. When she got a huge group of people that wanted to answer a question, she led them away from the chaotic crowd and regaled them with fun microbe facts first. “Even though they really just wanted a prize, they all looked really interested,” she said.

With the help of the UMD students and staff, microbiology and microbes have never been more popular at the Expo, drawing in fans of all ages. Likewise, science and engineering, which have always been rather intimidating fields for young students, were celebrated by brightly smiling cheerleaders at the Expo. Larry Bock, the creator and executive director of the festival, lamented the current condition of science and engineering in the United States. His purpose for bringing a science festival to the U.S. was to make science more accessible. Bock said that his hopes were that “people will look back and say, ‘Gee, it was at the U.S.A. Science and Engineering Festival that I first got the idea to do [science].’” And if the ear-piercing enthusiasm resonating from the exhibits and mobile labs were any indication, Bock succeeded in his goal by inspiring many future scientists.