

## Connecticut Science Center Announces 2016 STEM Achievement Awards Honorees

***Public invited to April 26 award breakfast honoring Pratt & Whitney's Jonna Gerken, The Jackson Laboratory's Walter Nakonechny, and the Connecticut Invention Convention***

**Hartford, CT**— March 22, 2016 — The Connecticut Science Center will present its annual STEM Achievement Awards at a breakfast at the Connecticut Science Center on Tuesday, April 26. The awards recognize local individuals and organizations for their outstanding contributions in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and STEM education. This year, the Petit Family Foundation Women in Science Leadership Award, recognizing a woman in the sciences who displays exceptional leadership in promoting interest and participation of women and girls in the STEM fields, will be given at the STEM Awards Breakfast for the first time.

This year's honorees are Jonna Gerken of Pratt & Whitney, Walter Nakonechny of The Jackson Laboratory, and the Connecticut Invention Convention. The honorees were selected by steering committees of educators and science professionals who reviewed nominations submitted by the public. Said Matt Fleury, Connecticut Science Center President & CEO, "As leaders in our community, the work that Jonna, Walter, and the Connecticut Invention Convention do is of critical importance in shaping the young minds and innovative leaders of tomorrow. We are grateful to all of our winners, finalists, and nominees for their important work."



Jonna Gerken is the 2016 Petit Family Foundation Women in Science Leadership Award honoree. Gerken is the Project Manager for Operations Development at Pratt & Whitney, where she coordinates the startup of new international manufacturing facilities for the production ramp-up of PurePower™ product families. An employee of Pratt & Whitney since 2000, Gerken has held numerous positions of increasing responsibility within both the operations and engineering divisions. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial & Management Engineering and a Master of Business Administration degree in Technology Development, both from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She is a lifetime member of the Society of Women Engineers and currently serves as their Director of Membership Initiatives. "I'm thrilled to receive this award, which recognizes my ongoing support of women in engineering, past, present and future," said Gerken. "Thank you to my outstanding support network that made this possible. I'm proud to stand with the distinguished group of women honored before me."



Walter Nakonechny, Associate Program Director of Genomic Education and Director of the Genomics Workforce Consortium at The Jackson Laboratory, has developed a distinguished career in biochemistry and education. Beginning in biotechnology research and shifting into education in 1999, Nakonechny held teaching positions at Putnam, Newtown, and Farmington High Schools before joining The Jackson Laboratory in 2014. There, the Genomics Workforce Consortium works to educate, train, and develop Connecticut's workforce for careers in genomics and biotechnology through collaborations and strategic partnerships between the Connecticut State College and University System, business leaders in the state's bioscience sector, and The Jackson Laboratory. Nakonechny holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Natural Resources and a Master of Science degree in Biochemistry from the University of Connecticut at Storrs. "Scientific reasoning is such a powerful way to think," said Nakonechny. "Thinking in this manner empowers our learners to dream boldly and ultimately achieve their career aspirations. It is a great honor to be part of such a gifted team of educators at The Jackson Laboratory who nurture and cultivate this approach to education."



The Connecticut Invention Convention (CIC) is an educational non-profit organization that offers students school-based programs in entrepreneurship and innovation, seeking to retain and instill creativity in Connecticut's children now and for the rest of their lives. Celebrating its 33<sup>rd</sup> year in 2015, CIC enjoyed record-breaking participation, with nearly 20,000 K–8 school children from more than half of the state's towns and districts engaging in CIC programs. Participants consist of more than 50% girls and 25% underrepresented minorities. Designed to foster an early interest in STEM careers, the Connecticut Invention Convention's goal is to have every child, in every school, become an inventor once. Said Helen Charov, Executive Director at Connecticut Invention Convention, "We are so honored and thrilled to receive this award. We have so many hard-working, dedicated teachers in our program, and so many other committed partners—we really couldn't do it without them."

The Connecticut Science Center STEM Achievement Awards debuted at the Connecticut Science Center's Green Gala in 2012. Past honorees include Governor Dannel Malloy, WFSB Meteorologist Mark Dixon, The Travelers Companies, Inc., United Technologies Corporation, and Connecticut Pre-Engineering Program (CPEP). The Petit Family Foundation Women in Science Leadership Award was first presented at the 2013 Green Gala. Each year, the honoree is selected by the Connecticut Science Center's Women in Science steering committee. Past honorees include Dr. Linda Barry, M.D.; Dr. Kristine Larsen, Astronomer; and Kimberly McLean, Principal Engineer, General Dynamics Electric Boat.

In recognition of the high profile of both these awards, they are now presented at an exclusive annual event, drawing community and business leaders from around the region. For tickets and more information about the STEM Achievement Awards Breakfast, presented by Stanley Black & Decker, please contact Claire Mayberry at 860-520-2154 or [cmayberry@ctsciencecenter.org](mailto:cmayberry@ctsciencecenter.org). Tickets for the general public are \$40 each and are available now at [CTScienceCenter.org/awards](http://CTScienceCenter.org/awards).

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**About the Connecticut Science Center:** The LEED-Gold certified Connecticut Science Center, located in downtown Hartford, sparks creative imagination and an appreciation for science by immersing visitors in fun and educational hands-on, minds-on interactive experiences while maintaining an environmentally conscious presence. Serving more than 2 million people since opening in 2009, the Science Center features more than 165 exhibits in ten galleries covering a range of topics, including space and earth sciences, physical sciences, biology, the Connecticut River watershed, alternative energy sources, Connecticut inventors and innovations, a children's gallery, and much more. Other features include four educational labs, a 200-seat 3D digital theater, a function room, a gift store, and ongoing events for all ages. The Science Center is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing science education throughout the state of Connecticut and New England, providing learning opportunities for students and adults of all ages, and engaging the community in scientific exploration. The Connecticut Science Center is also the home to the **Joyce D. and Andrew J. Mandell Academy for Teachers**, offering powerful Professional Development for educators. More information: [CTScienceCenter.org](http://CTScienceCenter.org) or 860.SCIENCE.

**About the Petit Family Foundation:** The Petit Family Foundation honors the memories of Jennifer Hawke-Petit, Hayley Elizabeth Petit, and Michaela Rose Petit by continuing the kindness, idealism, and activism that defined their lives. The Foundation's funds are given to foster the education of young people, especially women in the sciences; to improve the lives of those affected by chronic illness; and to support efforts to protect and help those affected by violence. More information: [PetitFamilyFoundation.org](http://PetitFamilyFoundation.org).

**About the Women in Science Initiative:** The Connecticut Science Center's Women in Science initiative encourages girls and young women to pursue studies and career paths in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and celebrates the achievements of women in the sciences. The initiative seeks to bridge the gender gap in STEM by developing original programming to engage girls in science and to build the community of women in the sciences. More information: [CTScienceCenter.org/WIS](http://CTScienceCenter.org/WIS).