Night (and day) at the Museums
12 places you need to see on campus
By Roseann Keegan. Photos by Jeff Dow.
Eight-year-old aspiring geologist Alyssa Ronilos stands wide-eyed in front of a sparkling display of quartz and amethyst at the W.M. Keck Earth Science and Mineral Engineering Museum. “Yeah, I’m pretty interested in this stuff,” says Ronilos, on vacation in Reno with her family from Jacksonville, Fla. “You can look at rocks and figure out what they are and what they’re used for. I love this!”

The W.M. Keck Museum, housed on the second floor of the Mackay Mines Building, is one of 12 museums scattered on and around campus featuring the wonders of Nevada, the University and the world. Curators from each location came together earlier this year to form a museum consortium.

“By banding together, we can move forward,” says University Galleries Director Paul Baker Prindle, who also hints at possible “Night at the Museum” events as well as wine walks. “Many of the museums and galleries on campus have large collections that are, unfortunately, widely unknown. Through our collaborations, we’re working to put the University District Museums on the map.”

On a Saturday in May, all of the museums, including the University’s Arboretum, teamed up to open their doors to the public in an effort to raise community awareness of these campus treasures that are hidden in plain sight.

“The number of museums on and around campus reflects the Nevada culture that we celebrate and embrace,” says Garrett Barmore, Mackay School of Mines Endowed Curator of the W.M. Keck Museum. “We may all be separate entities, but we can focus on our strengths.

By forming a consortium, we can share those strengths and for the first time work together.”

“This also helps bridge the gap between the University and the greater Reno community,” Barmore says.

Visitors can see thousands of unique items, including a priceless silver collection; rare rocks and minerals; a meteorite from outer space; a collection of insects; animals and plants from around the Great Basin and the world; stunning artwork; a working museum that houses printing presses from different eras; some of the oldest collections in Nevada dating back as far as the 1850s and medical artifacts used in Nevada just to name a few.

“The collaboration allows us to share our resources and knowledge, and helps each of us grow and excel in our individual missions,” says Donnelyn Curtis, head of Special Collections at the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center. “Some of the campus museums serve researchers as their primary users, but we all have an additional mission to serve the larger community and enhance the cultural life of Reno families and individuals. We think they will be surprised at what is tucked away in the museums on this campus.”

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All of the museums are located on campus, except the Wilbur D. May Museum, and all are within a mile of each other. Visitors are encouraged to walk from museum to museum and enjoy the beauty and history of the campus, which is a designated state arboretum and recognized as a Tree Campus USA with collections of trees and shrubs.

Students and visitors enjoy browsing through the wonders on display at the University’s Museum of Natural History, the only research and educational museum of its kind in the state.
For the first time in University of Nevada, Reno history, the research and teaching collections of the College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources and the College of Science have been integrated into a single natural history museum.

The Museum of Natural History opened its doors in 2014 in room 300 of the Fleischmann Agriculture Building on the corner of Evans Avenue and Record Street, and is the latest addition to the University District Museums.

The only research and educational museum of its kind in Nevada, the space holds specimens collected as far back as 1850. The growing collection is host to 92,000 plant specimens of historic value, a growing collection of almost half a million regional and tropical insects, more than 10,000 mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, and nearly 20,000 fish. "One of our missions is to instill a sense of wonder and excitement about the natural world and the unique place that is northern Nevada," says museum co-director and plant curator Elizabeth Leger. "Our exhibits highlight the biology and conservation of local plants, animals and fragile Great Basin ecosystems through living animals, student art, mounted specimens and other rare treasures from our own natural history collections. The plants, to me, are just gorgeous."

There is a dedicated display area for outreach and education, and an associated teaching laboratory for in-depth study. K-12 groups are welcome to tour, and museum staff is creating outreach programming to enhance the hands-on science experience for younger students through the aid of a recent National Science Foundation award to co-directors Leger and Chris Feldman, vertebrate curator.

"I love working in the museum," says graduate student Angela Hornsby ’09 M.S. (ecology, evolution and conservation biology), a Ph.D. candidate and curatorial assistant in the museum. "It’s fun to share Nevada’s natural heritage with students and visitors, and it’s gratifying to work toward making our collection available to researchers worldwide.”
Paul Baker Prindle arrived on campus in spring 2013, and has since brought his vision of a more vibrant, visual arts community to life.

“Great universities have great museums,” says Baker Prindle, who oversees the University’s family of art galleries. “University museums and galleries support campus communities by exploring today’s world through intellectual and creative inquiry. We’re committed to collecting, conserving, exhibiting and sharing art research with the understanding that both our cultural heritage and our future belong to the public.”

“We all need to embrace creativity as a lifestyle,” Baker Prindle adds. “Stepping up our game with what we do in the arts helps elevate Reno as a cultural center.”

Several spaces comprise the University Galleries, with the Sheppard Contemporary, the Front Door and the McNamara galleries housed inside the Church Fine Arts Building along South Virginia Street.

The Sheppard Contemporary Gallery is the premier art gallery of the University, where new exhibitions of contemporary art are offered every six weeks. Jean Stamsta’s “Neon Volcanoes” is on display through Oct. 24 and is drawn from the University Galleries’ permanent collection. Gifted from the Kohler Foundation Inc., the exhibit includes nearly 100 objects of Stamsta’s colorful work that combines fabric, paint, mirrors and glitter.

Student Galleries South is in the Jot Travis Building and is dedicated to student exhibitions. Over the summer, the space housed “I Am My Brother’s Keeper,” a moving tribute to the heroes who risked their lives to save and shelter Jews during the Holocaust.

According to Baker Prindle, it was the first time the exhibition has been exhibited in the United States. It challenges the viewer to think about the question, “What would you do?” if presented with situations in the exhibit and to think about how to prevent future genocides.

“Our gallery space really lends itself to the type of contemplative viewing this exhibition asks the viewer to do,” Baker Prindle says. University Galleries offers regularly scheduled programming and events co-hosted with other campus departments and local organizations. Exhibitions rotate frequently. On most Thursday nights, visitors will find an opportunity for a new art encounter in the galleries. Lectures, workshops, demonstrations, screenings, studio visits, receptions and more are all part of University Galleries programming accompanying each exhibition.

The University of Nevada, Reno, Department of Art Permanent Collection represents an impressive, decades-old collecting program that is noteworthy for its early attention to regional painters including Jim McCormick and Craig Sheppard. In addition to its collection of 19th and 20th century paintings, the collection is exceptionally strong in prints. The collection also includes works by Renoir, Calder, Warhol and others. Emeritus Professor Ed Martinez organized the collection of a number of print portfolios from major international printmakers to supplement a diverse collection that also includes examples of rare Japanese wood block prints, a who’s who of contemporary printmakers and master prints dating as far back as the 16th century. The encyclopedic collection is rounded out by African sculpture, marquetry furniture and glass and ceramic sculpture.

University Galleries is also beginning a three-year program of re-cataloguing the collection in addition to beginning a conservation program and is raising funds through the University of Nevada, Reno Foundation to support the project.
At the foot of the University’s historic Quadrangle sits the W.M. Keck Museum in the Mackay School of Mines building. It is the state’s second-oldest museum and houses an expansive selection of minerals, ores, fossil specimens and photographs in addition to mining-related objects.

The original building and museum opened in 1908 and is named for John Mackay, one of the “Big Four” mining magnates of the Comstock Lode bonanza. In 1908, this building and subsequent endowments were presented to the University in John Mackay’s honor by his widow, Mary-Louise, and his son, Clarence H. Mackay. The statue of John Mackay that stands proud in front of the building was created by renowned sculptor Gutzon Borglum, best known for his work on Mount Rushmore.

The museum was renamed in 1999 in honor of the W.M. Keck Foundation’s generous support of the building’s renovation.

With items displayed in their original, purpose-built wooden cases, the museum places a special emphasis on early Nevada mining history with samples from famous mineral districts that include the Comstock Lode, Tonopah and Goldfield.

“People are amazed to see what we have here at the Keck Museum,” says Mackay School of Mines Endowed Curator Garrett Barmore. “We have 250 million-year-old Ichthyosaur fossils, a pickax contorted by underground pressure, 50,000-year-old mammal tracks and a special hidden treasure: the Mackay Silver Collection.”

The lower level of the museum is home to...
Items at the W.M. Keck Museum, seen here from the second floor, are displayed in their original, purpose-built cases. The museum is open Monday to Friday and the first Saturday of the month for drop-in, self-guided tours. The museum is also available for tours for all K-12 school and community groups, and includes an introduction to rocks and minerals, fossils, introduction to the Mackay Statue, the Mackay Silver Collection and mining history.

The jaw-dropping silver collection, created by Tiffany & Co. for John Mackay and completed in 1878. The one-of-a-kind, 1,250-piece sterling silver set was commissioned by Mackay for his wife. A reported 200 craftsman worked exclusively on Mary-Louise’s set for two years, and when complete, Mackay purchased the dies so that the service could never be duplicated.

“The collection is remarkable as an example of the silver smith’s craft, and serves as both an artistic and historic monument,” Barmore says.

The museum is available for tours for all K-12 school and community groups. Tours are generally 45 minutes and include an introduction to rocks and minerals, fossils, introduction to the Mackay Statue, the Mackay Silver Collection and mining history. The museum also offers free traveling mineral kits for teachers to use in the classroom and provide hands-on earth science education.

The museum is also open Monday to Friday and the first Saturday of the month to all visitors for self-guided tours. Reservations are not necessary.

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—Garrett Barmore, curator and director of the W.M. Keck Museum
Housed in a distinct, 1960s-era dome overlooking campus, the Fleischmann Planetarium first opened in 1963 as the Fleischmann Atmospherium-Planetarium and was the world’s first public center of atmospheric studies of the Desert Research Institute. Since then, the planetarium has evolved to serve millions of visitors to the University campus as a resource for education in astronomy and earth and space science.

“It’s remarkably very similar to the way it was in 1963,” says Planetarium Director Dan Ruby. “We have daily star shows for the public, we offer a variety of field trips for students in grades K-12, people can wander around the exhibits in the building and we have friendly staff to answer questions.”

Still, the displays are anything but stale. The ever-changing displays and sky-dome movies attract up to 50,000 visitors per year, including more than 10,000 K-12 students.

The planetarium’s uniquely shaped building, officially termed a “hyperbolic paraboloid,” was designed by famed Reno architect Ray Hellmann and is now listed in the National Register of Historic Buildings. Rumor has it that students used to try to drive their cars to the top of the dome.

After recently undergoing upgrades, the center is now one of the first of a handful of planetariums around the world to utilize the Spitz SciDome digital projector, a high-resolution, state-of-the-art immersive visualization tool that produces extraordinarily bright and colorful 3-D images inside the center’s 60-seat immersive star theater. Current shows include “WE CHOOSE SPACE!” with astronauts Scott Parazynski, Tom Jones and Gene Cernan and veteran space reporter Walter Cronkite, who guide an adventure to the International Space Station and to the past and future moon.

The exhibit hall inside the planetarium contains hands-on interactive displays, as well as permanent exhibits that include large-scale rotating earth and moon globes, a black hole demonstrator, dozens of meteorites and more. The entrance to the exhibit hall was revamped a few years ago to resemble the entrance of a spacecraft, a feature that elicited excited squeals from young day campers visiting on a Friday in July.

The Science Store, at the entrance of the planetarium, is stocked with high-quality toys, educational resources, apparel, optics and more. A classroom space is also available for education programming, birthday parties and events.
There are several more stops throughout the University District Museums to enjoy. Special Collections and University Archives, a department of the University Libraries on the third floor of the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center, preserves and provides access to rare items and important subject collections. It primarily supports research on Nevada and the Great Basin, University history and book arts. Special Collections houses items that cannot be shelved with the library’s general collections because of their value, fragility, format or because they are a part of a specialized collection.

Special Collections also houses a growing number of political papers from Nevada politicians, including a 1964 letter from President Lyndon Johnson to Senator Alan Bible, which includes a gift of an uncirculated Kennedy half dollar. Senator Harry Reid’s papers will be coming to Special Collections when he leaves office at the end of 2016. Another treasure is an abandoned bible found in 1874 hidden in a cave along the Lassen Trail on the Emigrant Trail route to California. Items from Special Collections are featured in three themed exhibits per year, and often can be seen in other areas of the Knowledge Center. Items borrowed from other University district museums sometimes enhance Special Collections exhibits, a benefit of the collaboration.

Visitors can also visit the University’s Arboretum, which encompasses the entire campus and includes more than 200 species of trees. Highlights include the Cherry Blossom Garden, the Benson Gardens, Jimmie’s Garden, the Albert E. Hilliard Foliage Quad, the Merriam A. Brown Rose Garden and Manzanita Lake.

Additional stops within the district include the Great Basin History of Medicine Museum, the College of Engineering K-12 Teaching Lab, the Anthropology Research Museum and the Nevada Historical Society.

“The campus museums are not just for University students and faculty,” says Cheryll Glotfelty, English professor and University Arboretum Board chair. “They are a valuable resource for all ages and for the entire community. We hope to put the University District Museums on people’s radar and encourage people to visit our museums all year.”