Standing in front of the judicial bench inside the Supreme Court of Ohio building, Frederic Bertley begins with a story. It’s one he tells often, about his origins and a video game gone wrong. Some 200 high school students, teachers and the Supreme Court justices listen while he recalls the moment of his scientific awakening.

In this story, Bertley is 9 years old and wants to play an early handheld video game, but he keeps burning through the batteries that power it. So he finds an old lamp, cuts off the cord, wires it to the back of the game and plugs it directly into the wall—“best 10 seconds of my life!” he exclaims in the courtroom. It draws a big laugh, like always.

In the 11th second, everything goes haywire. The game explodes, flames char the wall at the outlet, and his father barrels downstairs to see why his youngest son is trying to burn down the house. In that moment, little Frederic has an epiphany: Electricity is interesting. He wants to understand the magic behind the wall.

It’s a good story, made even better by everything that followed: The curious, clever, mildly mischievous 9-year-old eventually became a Harvard-trained scientist and the president and CEO of the Center of Science and Industry. Bertley tells this story time and again because it serves as a charming introduction. It’s amusing, and it’s easy to visualize that moment. But it works best of all because he tells it with the same boundless enthusiasm every time. The sparks don’t come from the outlet, they come from him.

COSI CEO Frederic Bertley in the science center’s Mythic Creatures exhibit, one of its two galleries from the American Museum of Natural History

COSI’s highly credentialed, custom-sneaker-wearing, unicorn-whispering pitchman extraordinaire has big plans for the science center’s future.

BY CHRIS GAITTEN • PHOTOS BY ROB HARDIN
Bertley’s natural zeal requires some extra effort on this frigid February day. He’s been struggling to suppress a sharp cough, but he wasn’t going to miss the chance to be the guest speaker at the Supreme Court’s annual Black History Month Celebration. He’s been talking about science and STEM careers, but more importantly about race and our collective blindness to scientists of color, as well as their overlooked contributions. It’s also an opportunity to plug his most ambitious project yet, the inaugural COSI Science Festival in May.

Through the Supreme Court windows, COSI is visible just across the river, where it occupies prime real estate on the Scioto Peninsula. For most people, it’s an occasional family destination or a beloved institution from childhood, but its value among civic powerbrokers and its geographic position between Downtown and Franklinton make it vital to the city’s development.

F rom above, COSI resembles an alien spacecraft on a peninsula beachhead facing the rapidly developing Franklinton neighborhood. After Bertley took the reins in January 2017, COSI spent a year creating a new strategic plan, COSI 5.0, which emphasizes that the center’s future success is tethered in part to its role as an anchor of the peninsula’s emerging cultural district, the longtime dream of uber-donors Les and Abigail Weinzer. It’s not rare for an institution like COSI to be the linchpin of an urban revitalization, says Allen Proctor, who runs his own social-enterprise advocacy firm and has consulted for COSI in the past. But being the harbinger of change for the two decades since COSI’s move to Franklinton wasn’t always easy. When Bertley’s predecessor, David Chesebrough, took over in 2006, a third of COSI was closed and there were no cash reserves.

The building was too big to house a science center and was built more as an architectural icon, Chesebrough says. Perhaps it was a forward-looking design as the centerpiece of a future cultural district, but it wasn’t viable for the institution’s purpose. Along with renewed investment from city leaders, Chesebrough improved the finances by reimagining COSI. It went from a stand-alone facility to a hub of scientific activity by partnering with Battelle, Ohio State University and others to fill the building with programming at no cost to COSI, while also generating money from the spaces organized and leased. By the time Bertley arrived, COSI was back on stable financial ground.

In Bertley’s view, the development of the peninsula and Franklinton will only boost COSI’s prospects. “Selling tickets is based on flow,” he says. “Well, they’re building all this flow around me.” But that flow can come at a cost. As Proctor points out, the development of Dorrian Green park required the sacrifice of COSI’s surface parking lots and the associated revenue. The institution has consistently been a willing partner for these sorts of changes, Proctor says. “I think the real issue is, does the pioneer get rewarded or punished for being the pioneer?”

COSI also continues to evolve internally, most notably with the November 2017 opening of two galleries from the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Chesebrough says Les Weinzer secretly brought those galleries to the attention of Dorrian Green, town street and a cost. As Proctor points out, the development of Dorrian Green park required the sacrifice of COSI’s surface parking lots and the associated revenue. The institution has consistently been a willing partner for these sorts of changes, Proctor says. “I think the real issue is, does the pioneer get rewarded or punished for being the pioneer?”

COSI continues to evolve internally, most notably with the November 2017 opening of two galleries from the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Chesebrough says Les Weinzer secretly brought those galleries to the attention of COSI’s board of trustees and an advisory search committee of corporate and city leaders. BeecherHill put together an executive-profile summary calling for an innovative, visionary collaborator with ample political and business savvy, and proven networking and fundraising skills—plus a dozen other superlative qualities. It was tough to find, says Hilsheimer, BeecherHill’s founder, who was appointed to the board after the search. Yet had they crafted an executive profile tailored specifically to Frederic Bertley, it would have been at least as difficult and improbable to fill.

Bertley at the AMNH Dinosaur Gallery at COSI

In 2016, when Chesebrough announced his impending retirement, local executive-search firm BeecherHill was tasked with finding a replacement. With input from COSI’s board of trustees and an advisory search committee of corporate and city leaders, BeecherHill put together an executive-profile summary calling for an innovative, visionary collaborator with ample political and business savvy, and proven networking and fundraising skills—plus a dozen other superlative qualities. It was tough to find, says Hilsheimer, BeecherHill’s founder, who was appointed to the board after the search. Yet had they crafted an executive profile tailored specifically to Frederic Bertley, it would have been at least as difficult and improbable to fill.

He was born in November 1970 to Leo and June Bertley, natives of Trinidad and Barbados, respectively. They had 11 academic degrees between them and raised their four children in a music-filled home in Montreal, Canada. Bertley wanted to be a pro skier, then a pro hockey player, then a pro basketball player. When he graduated from 11th grade...
The business crowd has settled in for the Westerville Celebration on May 17. The frozen pyrotechnics serve as Bertley’s opening act. A frosty plume wafts across the foot of the stage. As the pyrotechnics end, a young woman in a white skirt and black shoes, an oversized shirt or jacket and large beaded necklaces. At the top, she asks, “What does creativity mean to you, CJ?” This answer comes clear as a bell: “Art is the window to the soul.” She answers, “Let’s just say it is just as important as air and water,” Van Thaer adds. “Creativity is a way of life.”

Bertley’s Color of Science program promotes diversity in the STEM community. “It’s essential to highlight stories like John-Newton’s,” Bertley says. “Even if this is only 1% of the population that is made up of women and people of color.” Tyson asked Bertley about her 40 years of experience with satellites and the importance of her work on the first three years. “That is probably Frederic’s most important goal from the 5.0 strategic plan. This will bring staff from its 10 research labs to one campus for a carnival with hands-on activities and interactive exhibitions. Heather McPherson, answers, “Let’s just say he’s kind of the Energizer bunny incarnate,” Van Thaer adds. When asked what he’s like outside work, his wife, Heather McPherson, says, laughing. “He’s kind of the Energizer bunny incarnate,” Van Thaer adds. When cavemen huddled around the fires and shared stories, they would use photos with them. Afterward, he talks with a group of students from the Franklin Science Festival and plugs it directly into the wall—“best 10 seconds of my life!” he says while he recalls the moment of his scientific awakening.

In conversation, Bertley is ebullient and bordering on theatrical. His scientific bona fides may have helped him win the job, but he’s at least as much of a showman, storyteller and hand-shaking pitchman. Bertley gets a tour of the Franklin Science Center’s Mythic Creatures exhibit, one of its two permanent exhibits at the science center’s entrance. Bertley clicks to the next slide in his presentation and sure enough Einstein’s picture poses celebrities everyone knows—Morgan Freeman and Morgan Freeman and Morgan Freeman. Tyson asked Bertley about her research on the first three years of the program and the impact it has had. “This is not a magic show,” he says. “I don’t know what it is, but I think it’s a whole cabinet of them in COSI’s offices. Those little touches matter, Van Thaer says, and have helped foster connections around town. “It’s just so passionate about contributing to the betterment of our community that he has been a driving force in COSI,” Heydtlauff says. “He’s become invested in Columbus.”

Bertley serves on the boards of the Experience Columbus and the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, and he’s the co-chair of the Commission for Black Girls, founded last July by Columbus City Council member Priscilla Tyson. The commission seeks ways to intervene early in the lives of girls to keep them from accelerometer–counter the problems of black women—for lower wages, higher eviction rates, elevated risk of maternal mortality and countless others. Tyson asked Bertley to help lead the commission because “he gets it—he wants to make sure kids of color have better access to STEM curriculum.”

In late 2018, COSI unveiled a pair of programs Bertley has implemented in previous years, both of which aim to increase STEM access and participation. The Color of Science highlights the overlooked scientific discoveries and developments of African American and Latinx scientists and mathematicians. “That is probably Frederic’s most important goal from the 5.0 strategic plan. This will bring staff from its 10 research labs to one campus for a carnival with hands-on activities and interactive exhibitions. The Platform will identify promising students for weekly sessions on hands-on labs and research with experts from out middle school and high school. Bertley is also working with local universities to get commitments for providing full ride scholarships to participants in the program who will begin accepting students in 2020, and he hopes to find other corporations and foundations to support this effort. For example, he tells often, about his origins and a video game gone wrong. Some scientists and mathematicians,” Bertley tells often, about his origins and a video game gone wrong. Some scientists and mathematicians, and then all of Central Ohio. The hope is that it eventually will serve as grand marshals of the festival on May 17. The recipients will serve as key pieces of the workforce puzzle.

This is not a magic show,” he says. “I don’t know what it is, but I think it’s a whole cabinet of them in COSI’s offices. Those little touches matter, Van Thaer says, and have helped foster connections around town. “It’s just so passionate about contributing to the betterment of our community that he has been a driving force in COSI,” Heydtlauff says. “He’s become invested in Columbus.”

Bertley serves on the boards of the Experience Columbus and the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, and he’s the co-chair of the Commission for Black Girls, founded last July by Columbus City Council member Priscilla Tyson. The commission seeks ways to intervene early in the lives of girls to keep them from accelerometer–counter the problems of black women—for lower wages, higher eviction rates, elevated risk of maternal mortality and countless others. Tyson asked Bertley to help lead the commission because “he gets it—he wants to make sure kids of color have better access to STEM curriculum.”

In late 2018, COSI unveiled a pair of programs Bertley has implemented in previous years, both of which aim to increase STEM access and participation. The Color of Science highlights the overlooked scientific discoveries and developments of African American and Latinx scientists and mathematicians. “That is probably Frederic’s most important goal from the 5.0 strategic plan. This will bring staff from its 10 research labs to one campus for a carnival with hands-on activities and interactive exhibitions. The Platform will identify promising students for weekly sessions on hands-on labs and research with experts from out middle school and high school. Bertley is also working with local universities to get commitments for providing full ride scholarships to participants in the program who will begin accepting students in 2020, and he hopes to find other corporations and foundations to support this effort. For example, he tells often, about his origins and a video game gone wrong. Some scientists and mathematicians, and then all of Central Ohio. The hope is that it eventually will serve as grand marshals of the festival on May 17. The recipients will serve as key pieces of the workforce puzzle.

This is not a magic show,” he says. “I don’t know what it is, but I think it’s a whole cabinet of them in COSI’s offices. Those little touches matter, Van Thaer says, and have helped foster connections around town. “It’s just so passionate about contributing to the betterment of our community that he has been a driving force in COSI,” Heydtlauff says. “He’s become invested in Columbus.”

Bertley serves on the boards of the Experience Columbus and the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, and he’s the co-chair of the Commission for Black Girls, founded last July by Columbus City Council member Priscilla Tyson. The commission seeks ways to intervene early in the lives of girls to keep them from accelerometer–counter the problems of black women—for lower wages, higher eviction rates, elevated risk of maternal mortality and countless others. Tyson asked Bertley to help lead the commission because “he gets it—he wants to make sure kids of color have better access to STEM curriculum.”

In late 2018, COSI unveiled a pair of programs Bertley has implemented in previous years, both of which aim to increase STEM access and participation. The Color of Science highlights the overlooked scientific discoveries and developments of African American and Latinx scientists and mathematicians. “That is probably Frederic’s most important goal from the 5.0 strategic plan. This will bring staff from its 10 research labs to one campus for a carnival with hands-on activities and interactive exhibitions. The Platform will identify promising students for weekly sessions on hands-on labs and research with experts from out middle school and high school. Bertley is also working with local universities to get commitments for providing full ride scholarships to participants in the program who will begin accepting students in 2020, and he hopes to find other corporations and foundations to support this effort. For example, he tells often, about his origins and a video game gone wrong. Some scientists and mathematicians, and then all of Central Ohio. The hope is that it eventually will serve as grand marshals of the festival on May 17. The recipients will serve as key pieces of the workforce puzzle.