Lab tech’s microbes go viral

Teaching son science draws popular response

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APTOS » Tasha Sturm’s microbes have gone viral.
To demonstrate the pervasiveness of microbes in our daily lives, the Cabrillo College lab tech sent her 8-year-old son outside to play with the dog before asking him to gently press his hand into a Petri dish at their kitchen table.
The dish was filled with tryptic soy agar, a nutritious jelly that doubles as an ideal environment for growing cultures.
After incubating the dish at body temperature for 48 hours and storing it at room temperature for three additional days, a colorful microbial imprint of her son’s hand developed.
“I’ve been doing it with my kids for years. It’s nothing new to them,” Sturm of Aptos said. “I use the technique to demonstrate that microbes are everywhere to my microbiology students.”
Late last week, Sturm photographed the hand-shaped microbial flora in the dish and posted the images to Microbe World, a site to which she regularly contributes.
“I’m not really Internet savvy,” Sturm said. “Someone emailed me yesterday and said, ‘Your handprint has become famous. It’s on Reddit.’ I was like, ‘Oh, OK. I didn’t really grasp what that meant.”

Microbes
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Friday, Microbe World, which is an educational outreach initiative from the American Society for Microbiology, posted Sturm’s images on Facebook and her son’s microbes went viral.
Over the weekend, the images exploded on Twitter, Reddit and Imgur. By Monday, Sturm was receiving image requests from organizations like BuzzFeed Science, Yahoo Canada, The Smithsonian Magazine and even a photo news agency in Rome, Italy.
The media attention has only intensified. Articles have recently appeared on Today.com, Mashable and Medical Daily. The Huffington Post called the handprint “mesmerizingly creepy.”
“Everything on that plate is pretty much normal. It’s not harmful. It’s what we’re exposed to every day,” Sturm said.
According to Sturm, some of the microbes in the image can be identified by sight.

The microbes on Tasha Sturm’s son’s hand developed into this startling hand-shaped image after the Cabrillo College lab tech incubated the dish for three days. The photos have since gone viral on the Internet.

TASHA STURM — CONTRIBUTED