

A Place for Children

Springfield-based group hopes to build children's museum by 2008.

By Amber Healy
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If Jane Zatkowsky and her co-horts have their way, museums won't just be for masterpiece paintings and scientific facts any more.

Inspired by her 3-year-old son Jack, Zatkowsky has spent the past few months surrounding herself with people who share her colorful dream of opening a children's museum in Springfield.

"We were visiting this museum in North Carolina that had a 4-foot-tall version of a town built for little kids and my husband said to me, 'Hey, you could do this'," she said.

With the National Children's Museum in Washington closed until at least 2009, Zatkowsky said a need exists in Northern Virginia for a place where children can learn while they play.

"There's a huge demand for this kind of thing," she said. "The more people I talk to about this idea, the more we get excited about it."

ONE OF THE first people to join in Zatkowsky's plans was Beth Kimlick, a preschool resource teacher.

"One day, Jane mentioned to me that she wanted to start this museum and I offered to help," Kimlick said. "The next thing I know, she's coming by and running ideas by me."

Now president of the board for "i play," the official name of the museum, Kimlick said she's already working ideas for the interactive, multi-sensory exhibits that will take up nearly half of the museum.

"I'd love to have a kitchen that's about kids' sized that they can interact with," Kimlick said. "Multi-sensory exhibits are about more than just touch. They're going to feel things, touch things, smell things, hear things."

Ideally, Kimlick said she's love to have the outside of the building be as interesting and playful as the interior.

"If I had my way, I'd have dragon tails coming out of the roof or maybe a big tree they can climb with nests on the branches that they can bounce around in," said Kimlick, laughing.

The museum has been gaining momentum since November, when Zatkowsky first approached Kimlick with the idea.

"Things have just catapulted," Zatkowsky said. "I initially thought this might be a little activity center but people really seem to want more. They want to experiences all of the arts here – science, math, tactile exhibits, art."

However, all of these dreams have a long way to go before children have a museum for a playground.

"Right now, we're looking to find a place for the museum," she said. "I'd love to be able to build a building, but it's really expensive in this market. We'll probably have to take on an existing place."

Zatkowsky said she's hoping to raise about \$10 million to start the museum, which would include the price of purchasing a building and some property, start up fees for exhibits and two or three years' worth of operating expenses. Currently, the board of i play is in the process of becoming a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit organization, said board member John Frazier.

"Starting this spring and summer and going through the fall, we're going to be at various outdoor events like flea markets, Celebrate Fairfax, Springfield Days and the like to get the word out to people that this is coming," Frazier said. "Hopefully, next year, things will get rolling. Our goal is to open in early 2008," he said.

THE MUSEUM has already been incorporated as a business, the Children's Museum of Greater Springfield, Inc., said John Pellegrin, the attorney representing the museum.

"I think this will be a great opportunity for Springfield," Pellegrin said. "Kids don't have a lot of stuff to do outside the regular school stuff and with Springfield growing and all the changes coming with BRAC, it's a great opportunity for the area to grow with the new residents," he said.

The biggest goal for now, however, is finding a home.

If a piece of land or a building was donated to the museum, Pellegrin said the \$10 million start-up funding could go a lot further toward the creation of exhibits and features, which may later include musical groups and touring workshops for families to enjoy together.

"This is all still a work in progress, we want to get quality people involved and do this the right way," Pellegrin said.

Support is beginning to come in from government leaders as well.

"It's a wonderful thing," said Supervisor Elaine McConnell (R-Springfield). "If children have a chance to participate in learning, it will engage them. When you can educate children about other cultures and civilizations, it's all very important."

A preschool teacher herself, McConnell said interactive learning is better for children, and with exhibits geared toward all five senses, the museum should be a learning tool for children of all ages and abilities.

"Just looking at a book isn't the best way for some children to learn," she said.

"I'm sure there will be ways to capture the imagination of all kinds of children." Supervisor Dana Kauffman (D-Lee) agreed with McConnell and said the museum is "a worthwhile adventure."

"The key with this group, as with any, is matching their ideas with some money to make it happen," Kauffman said. "I am firm in the belief that the first step is to secure financial backing to give this project some real legs."

The father of a young son, Kauffman said he's taken his family to the Crayola Crayon factory in Pennsylvania and other specialty destinations designed to incorporate a child's imagination with an educational outing.

Museums centered around children "are an attraction," Kauffman said. "The key is ensuring their long-term viability."

Ready, Set, Play

For more on I Play, the proposed children's museum, visit www.iplaycm.org or call John Frazier at 703-969-8093 or Jane Zatkowsky at 703-282-7095.



Photo by Jennifer Cardwell

Hoping to open their museum in two years, members of the Board of Directors for the i play Children's Museum, from left, John Pellegrin, Jane Zatkowsky, John Frazier, Beth Kimlick, Jennifer Cardwell and Jay Cohen, hope their enthusiasm will inspire investors and volunteers.