

Happy Birthday to the Upper Peninsula Children's Museum! The museum recently celebrated their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday on March 22, 2017. They threw a huge party to mark the milestone; 450 plus people came to celebrate the joyous occasion, and there was cake! Amazing, right? But it wasn't always party time for the Museum; from the initial idea, to actually opening the doors to the public the process wasn't easy.

Nheena Weyer Ittner, the Museum's Executive Director, came up with the idea for the "birth" of a children's museum in Marquette after the birth of her own children.

"I was an art teacher and I moved to the Upper Peninsula when I got married and at that point, Marquette was a very different place than it is now. There wasn't a lot going on for kids. There wasn't a lot going on at all in this town. It was kind of a dull town. I always wanted to do more things for my students, so I tried to start a number of different things for them and then I became a mom. I started seeing what Marquette was offering for kids through the eyes of a mother and little kids. I had always gone to children's museums because I was always interested in them; so then I started to explore that possibility. I decided that we needed one here in Marquette," said Ittner.

The original idea had family fun time together as its main goal.

"Well, my main motivation was I wanted a place for my own children to be able to go to learn, without any competition: to have fun, where I could have fun with them, where children could be with parents. They could learn together, laugh together, spend time together in a very safe place," explained Ittner.

The early days of trying to put together the Upper Peninsula Children's Museum were like riding a roller coaster: full of ups and downs, highs and lows.... perhaps terrifying screams? Ittner believed in her idea even though at first, others were not so sure.

"At first, when I first came up with this idea my thought was it would be a great project for a service club to take over, so I very bravely went to various service clubs and gave them speeches and pitched them to take over, but most of the service club people thought I was a crazy person; crazy loon, like they weren't going to do this, but then I came to realize it was probably going to have to be me and so I gathered friends together and we formed what we called the Advisory Board. I chaired the Advisory Board for many years and we just dreamed up ideas and got ideas going. In 1991 we decided to buy this building [123 W. Baraga]. We bought it on a land contract, which meant we paid for it, finally, in 2013."

Buying a building for the museum was only half the battle. Money, a lot of money was still needed to open the doors to the public. Fundraising is always challenging, but with a little creative problem solving, Ittner and her Advisory Board came up with the perfect solution.

“We were paying money on this building; we never had very much money and it was hard to raise money in this town at that time, it’s kind of changed since then, and so then we decided that one of the ways we could actually get money would be if we made the designing of the museum into a program. That’s how we started the participatory design program called Design-o-Saurus. Kids designing all parts of the museum, because then we were able to get grant money for programming.”

The museum had a building. The exhibits were being designed and built. Uphill battle won? Not quite. Ittner said there still was a lot of work to be done and a lot to learn too.

“When I started the Children’s Museum I had to change the zoning of the street. I had to start a non-profit organization. I had to do a lot of networking. I had to learn how to write grants because I had never written a grant before. I had never asked anyone for money before.... so I had a lot to learn, a big learning curve,” Ittner said.

Jim Edwards, or a.k.a. Mr. Jim, as many kids, parents, and locals know him as, is the Museum’s floor manager and he was very involved with the Museum since the beginning. Edwards married in Marquette and was new to the country and he started out as a volunteer at the Museum as a way to get more involved in a new community, but shortly became an official employee at the Museum and has dedicated 24 years working there. Edwards remembers some of the daunting aspects of getting the museum off the ground.

“I think we realized we didn’t have the funding to do what other museums in the country were doing and that we were a small town and so we engaged young people, age 8-18 to be our designers, so we avoided the most daunting task, which was huge funding and we got 9- year- olds, basically to tell us what to build. ” said Edwards.

Ittner followed her own advice when encountering the more difficult aspects of getting the museum off the ground.

“Well, the whole entire thing was daunting. It was huge. But, one of my favorite quotes, my bits of advice is you, ‘look as far ahead of you as you can and you go in that direction and when you get there the next direction is clearer.’ That’s kind of how we went about it. We planned what we thought we’d like to do, but so much of it I had to live and figure out before I knew the next direction we were going to go in. I look back on it now and I don’t even know if I could ever do it again. It was huge. It was huge! There was a lot of stuff we had to figure out. There were moments we had absolutely no money and huge bills looming over our heads. It was ....you just can’t give up, you have to keep going,” said Ittner.

The Museum has impacted the community in many ways over the last twenty years. Ittner’s dream of creating a safe, loving space for families to come and play has come true. Edwards also recognizes that not only does the museum provide hours of

imaginative play for youngsters, the museum also provides a safe place for at risk youth.

“I once was a math teacher in high school where you learn to ask something called the Null Hypothesis, which is: what if we didn’t? What if it wasn’t there? So I always ask the people I work with, what if we didn’t do this? What if we closed tomorrow? The answer is horrible. The answer is we can’t close tomorrow. The museum now, after twenty years of being open, we have a place an important place in the community. I’ve worked for the last two years to bring groups into the museum who deal with children’s upbringing and development: children with grief, children with diabetes, a parent coalition that looks after all the services for children under 5. Community groups come in here. Boy Scout leaders are here for their meeting. Girl Scout leaders are here for their meetings. The museum becomes a place that is central to the question about children growing up and I’m very proud that every week one of those groups are here.”

What does Ittner see in the future for the Upper Peninsula Children’s Museum?

“One of the things I would like to see through this 20<sup>th</sup> season is an establishment of a large endowment. If we have a large endowment then we would have a certain amount of assured money into perpetuity. That’s a really good idea that we would have that kind of assured money. I’d also like to be able to see it [Children’s Museum] continue being used and people loving it and taking care of it and helping us to make it a secure place and I hope it will go on forever and ever and ever,” said Ittner.

The Upper Peninsula Children’s Museum has a new tagline to help celebrate their 20<sup>th</sup> year: “It’s all about love!” .... and it’s pretty obvious that Marquette families love the Upper Peninsula Children’s Museum right back.

Written by: Liam Ulland-Joy, 12 and Annabella Martinson, 12 with contributions by Sophia Portale, 12, Anja McBride, 12 and Anna Rayhorn, 11.