

Exhibits are the heart of a museum, but what is a newly imagined children's museum with little to no money to fund the design and building of exhibits to do? Well, that was the dilemma that the Upper Peninsula Children's Museum faced twenty years ago. They are celebrating their 20th anniversary this year so they obviously found a way to bring the museum to life with little funding. Hint: The answer was kid powered of course! 8-18 Media sat down with the Upper Peninsula Children's Museum Executive Director Nheena Weyer Ittner and the Museum's Floor Manager and Education Coordinator, Jim Edwards to talk about how the museum's exhibits came to life with a little gumption and imagination and how the exhibits continue to be the heart of the museum today.

8-18: We know that a process called Design-o-saurus was used to design the museum's exhibits. Can you explain why the museum chose that process?

Weyer Ittner: When the museum was just starting, we didn't have any money. In most places like this, you would go out and hire a firm, a design firm to actually design exhibits, but the Children's Museum at that time had no money. We didn't have the ability to go and hire some big New York firm to come in and design a whole museum for us. Then we decided the most brilliant solution was to actually ask the kids who were going to use the museum about what they wanted so that's how the whole process began and we thought you know what? The kids are all there and why not? The kids can make decisions and design something very unique and you know what? It wouldn't cost us a lot of money and it could be a program and kids would have fun and design really good things.

8-18: Can you explain how the Design-o-saurus process works?

Weyer Ittner: Well, the problem solving approach is the [acronym] IDEPPEI. It stands for the letters in the process. I is called intending. What do you intend to do? Let's say we are designing the bathrooms, so our intention is to design bathrooms, then you have to D, define the problem so our problem is we have a space that needs to be made into a bathroom, but it has a big giant pipe all the way in the middle of it. So the next thing is E, explore, so what you have to do is explore all the options in designing, so that might mean that we go out to look at bathrooms in fancy buildings or we might go to see kind of an unusual designed bathroom and so we have to explore the possibilities. Then we worked in groups and then it was P, planning; after you explore all the possibilities you sit with a group of people you start to plan out your solutions to the problem and then you P, produce it. What we did is we would produce designs, we would produce them either three dimensionally or on a piece of paper so there was an actual plan produced that you could look at and then the next thing is to E, evaluate it so we would have people come in and say well, this works out or this doesn't work out and then the last thing is I, implementing it; you actually then do the plan that you have gone through this process with. So, that's how we do it and it's a very simple structure on which to make decisions.

8-18: What is the advantage the Design-o-saurus process?

Edwards: There is a theory, the theory says you can't have a good idea without friction, where stuff doesn't quite work, but now you meet it, you want your voice heard. Design-o-saurus happens because we get lots and lots of voices and we can choose from them after we let them battle it out for a while and have friction. I love that. I encourage it. So that's the point we have. One thing I'll say about Design-o-saurus: when you have the power of a group, you can do more.

8-18 Media: Do you still employ the Design-o-saurus program today or plan on using it in the future?

Weyer Ittner: Absolutely, because what it does is it engages people to think and you can have any aged person be engaged, you don't have to necessarily explain that these are the steps you are going through, but you just take them through the steps and what it does is it allows you to explore possibilities on which you can make decisions. We are going to do it all the time. It's a brilliant way to make a decision.

8-18 Media: How do you want the exhibits designed by kids 20 years ago to impact the lives of children today?

Edwards: It's a safe place to pretend. I think if you are going to have an exhibit; you can have an exhibit like I saw at another children's museum where you had to do physics and you had to pull out this, understand the math, plug this back into another hole to make the light work... I thought ok that is really somewhere up in seventh grade. With our community right now and the fears we all have, if I could have every child in Marquette practice sharing, and what I call empathy, thinking about other people. I think the impact of exhibits has to be about how a family gets along together and how children get along together. Because if we can share the ball, share the crayons, share the animal, we've got a much better community. That's why children's museums are children's museums because it's the place where parents join in children's play. Those are the two big deals.

Weyer Ittner: I think what I would like the exhibits to do is to provide a kind of a stage in which they walk in and they are the performers on the stage, they are the ones who are thinking about how to problem solve, imagine and create solutions. Our primary audience is little tiny kids. What I want to do...I want them to come in think of this as something they get really excited about. That they can run in and that they can pretend in the café some of the real world things they see in their lives that they can then pretend with those same objects, those same things they see their parents interacting with that they interact with them in their own ways. I want them to be able to feel confident and that their ideas are valued. I want them to come in and laugh, interact with other people, to be able to feel the significance that they are a significant person in this world.

8-18: What do you see in the museum's future as far as exhibits?

Weyer Ittner: I think we will always be changing and tweaking. We are in the process right now of rebuilding the entire Body Exhibit and what the Children's Museum in their strategic plan wants to do is after we finish the Body Exhibit we are going to spend an entire year just looking at the exhibits we have right now and tweaking them. That means maybe pulling out a wall, putting in a different wall, painting it, and putting in different features. We are just going kind of give it a whole fresh look. We want to spend a whole year doing that so that we don't start anything new, but we just make what we have better. Then we might do something totally different. Completely off the wall.

8-18 Media: Is there a current exhibit that is your favorite? Why?

Edwards: The fart slide. I asked for 22-foot fart slide. We were going to build a straight thing and I asked the designer if we can make it 22 feet and he asked why; because and your intestines are 22 feet long and so mine. If you take them out and stretch them out it's the length of that slide. The fart button works and it's just funny now. People who have never been here before; like last week I sit there and watch them. I say, 'whatever you do, do not press the red button'. They are all puzzled. The child clamors around the place and dad's there and (farting noise) and they laugh. The three-year-olds are laughing and the 12 year -olds are laughing and the 17 year- olds are laughing and I think of all the things in the museum it is the one thing that never gets old. It's naughty. It's good.

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