

TACOMA

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All Work, Now Play

*After years of hard work and fund-raising,
the Children's Museum of Tacoma is ready to have fun*

By Todd Matthews, Editor

The Children's Museum of Tacoma has a history downtown that dates back more than 25 years. In 1985, a group of parents, teachers and community leaders united to create a museum for kids. One year later, the Children's Museum of Tacoma was born. In 1997, the museum relocated to a 3,800-square-foot space located at 936 Broadway, where it remained for 14 years.

The museum will temporarily close its doors today so it can start another chapter downtown. It is moving from Broadway to a brand-new space on Pacific Avenue. The move follows many years of planning and fund-raising. In March 2010, the museum signed a 10-year lease with United Way of Pierce County to occupy the bottom floor of the non-profit's headquarters, located at 1501 Pacific Avenue. The museum also launched a \$7 million capital campaign -- \$5 million toward renovation of the new space, including all-new exhibits; \$1 million toward the "Play to Learn" community outreach program; and \$1 million toward a "Pay As You Will" admission program that aims to eliminate financial barriers and open the museum to everyone.

When the museum re-opens in its new location on Jan. 14, one of the first things visitors will notice is how much more roomier it is: the new

space is 8,700 square feet. Other new features include Cafe Play, which will be open to the public, offer a full-service espresso bar managed by locally-owned Satellite Coffee, and feature healthy snacks and sandwiches; members-only two-hour parking (10 stalls during weekdays, with additional stalls on weekends); 40 storage lockers and parking for strollers; and an orientation room for visitors to meet staff and each other.

Those amenities are geared toward grown-ups. Children, on the other hand, will enjoy five brand-new exhibits that will feature a wooded area with a bridge, path, secret nooks, areas to build forts, and pulleys for raising and lowering toys and supplies; a water-themed exhibit that features streams, still-water pools, and a falling water fountain that kids can control by using cranks and levers; and a massive structure known as "Voyager" that looks like a hybrid pirate ship / cargo wagon / space rocket with giant wings, a wheel house, gauges, signals and communications gear. The museum will also include an art studio and an area for building things.

The *Tacoma Daily Index* recently toured the new museum and spoke with executive director Tanya Andrews. Here are some of her comments.

"The Children's Museum has been looking for a new home for a long time," says Children's Museum of Tacoma Executive Director Tanya Andrews, who has been with the museum for 15 years. The museum is in the process of relocating from Broadway to a larger space on Pacific Avenue, and will re-open in January. "I can't remember a time that we weren't dreaming about a new home."

(PHOTO BY TODD MATTHEWS)

ON FINDING A NEW HOME FOR THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF TACOMA

The Children's Museum of Tacoma has been looking for a new home for a long time. I have been with the Children's Museum for 15 years and I can't remember a time that we weren't dreaming about a new home. In terms of the criteria that led us to the United Way building, a few years ago we did a survey to our broad community. I thought if 100 people responded we would be lucky. We had 350 people in our community from very diverse stakeholder groups share with us what their dreams for the Children's Museum were. It was to be downtown -- if we could have all the amenities of the Museum District, that would be great. Could we be more accessible off the freeway? Could we be more accessible via public transportation?

So the Children's Museum started looking. Space in downtown Tacoma is challenging. A lot of these buildings are old and have a lot of structural beams. Children's museums need a lot of wide, open space. They need to

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 feel safe. You need to be able to accommodate some pretty unique needs when you are dealing with young families.

The CEO of United Way and I were in an elevator together one day and he asked me, 'How is your site search going?' I said, 'You know, it stinks. It's a challenge.' He said, 'You know, we have some space open in our building. Why don't you come look at it?' I thought, 'Oh, here we go, another road we're going to go down that will lead nowhere.' But really, instantly, we fell in love with the space. We had a pretty distinguished committee helping us find a new home. Within two days, I think, they made a recommendation to the board that the board seriously consider this space.

Three years later, here we are.

ON FUND-RAISING FOR THE NEW MUSEUM

The board launched a \$7 million capital campaign, \$5 million of which is to get us in this space to do what I think is arguably a beautiful tenant improvement on the building and put over \$1 million into our playscapes, and then \$2 million to help us reach some pretty interesting goals in our community.

One is we will be the first private children's museum in the country to operate under a "Pay As You Will" admission program. The board looked and it was actually a pretty easy decision. We give away almost half of our admissions for free. Last year, we saw just over 65,000 people at our teeny little postage-stamp-sized museum up on Broadway, and about half of those were free. The board really looked at the kind of income we were getting from admissions and said, 'Boy, if we could raise a corpus and spend it down a little bit every year, we could actually open our doors to everyone.' Access has always been a cornerstone of the museum. So the board was able to say, 'What are all the barriers that stand between families and the Children's Museum?' We knew that cost was one of them. It's gone. So visitors will be invited to be philanthropists. If they would like to make a donation when they come in, they are welcome to do that. Otherwise, thanks to our big donor, Key Bank, it's free. We feel really excited about that. I actually hope that we can prove to other children's museums across the country that this is a sustainable way to do business. We also feel it is the right thing to do.

The other \$1 million will support the museum's outreach program "Play to Learn." It's a neighborhood-based program. Right now we are in seven different neighborhoods in Pierce County. The goal is by 2015 to be county-wide. It's a program that helps those who are at home caring for children -- about half of our kids are in that form of childcare. If you are with either a stay-at-home parent or a family or friend or daycare caring for little ones each day, helping them see, first of all, what are the expectations that we have for them when they get into kindergarten so there's a smooth and successful transition for children. It also really helps the adult understand that everything that little person needs they can get through play.

ON ADDING A CAFE AND REMOVING THE MUSEUM STORE

We heard two things from our survey.

One was that [a museum store is] a confusing message for the children -- 'Why can I play with everything except the stuff that's in this corner?'

The other message is that typically museum stores hit you right when you enter or exit. If you are a family that's not in a position to buy things, it makes you feel bad. And we really don't want anybody feeling bad about coming to the Children's Museum.

We also heard, 'Man, would I like a cup of coffee.' So our hope is that by offering Cafe Play,

RIGHT: The Children's Museum of Tacoma will open its doors on Jan. 14 in the bottom floor of the United Way of Pierce County headquarters building located at 1501 Pacific Avenue; BELOW RIGHT: The new museum will include a cafe serving espresso, snacks, and sandwiches; BOTTOM: One of the new exhibits is "Voyager," a hybrid pirate ship / cargo wagon / rocket with giant wings, a wheel house, gauges, signals and communications gear; BELOW: Voyager under construction last week. (PHOTOS BY TODD MATTHEWS / DESIGN ILLUSTRATION COURTESY CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF TACOMA)

we're able to offset that income. The museum store never made us much money anyway, to be honest. So we'll see how that experiment goes. Most children's museum cafes do quite well.

