

Guest view: It's all work for much play



NICOLE L. CVETNIC / *Observer-Dispatch* From left, Liam Moran and brother Grady, Rome, and Jade Pendarvis , Ava giggle as magician Jeff shows them how a rope trick is done during a Saturday Science Magic show last January at the Children's Museum.

By MARLENE B. BROWN

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A comment by Ben Stein in the New York Times read: “We are more than our investments. We are what we do for charity and our community.” That raises the question: How do children’s museums survive in a difficult economy?

When updating future visions, boards and directors look at ways to earn the trust of the community that gives its time, talents and funds. That means looking at ways to develop relationships to form collaborative opportunities.

It means conducting visitor surveys, readjusting hours, asking for letters of appreciation and support from elected officials.

It also means being proud of histories. Organized in October 1963 by the Junior League, Utica’s Children’s Museum proudly now includes four floors of interactive exhibits for kids from 1 to 101.

It means being unique in how museums serve diverse communities. What do we offer?

*** First floor: life-size wooden train, interactive robot, exploration station, playspace.**

*** Second floor: PlayDance floor, Iroquois longhouse, interactive dinorama.**

*** Third floor: Touchscreen exhibits, living science center, train centers, weather station, Int’l Halls of Fame: BRCK.**

*** Fourth floor: Lunar lander, Mars rover, Columbia Shuttle, Hot Wheels hall, interactive science/space scale/flight timeline exhibits, an airplane.**

It means continuing to improve building aesthetics. What have we done?

In 2002 we opened the fourth floor and were adopted by NASA and the Office of Science.

In 2003, we installed new heating/air conditioning and became headquarters for the International halls of fame.

In 2004, we installed a new oak front door and entranceway.

In 2005, we installed new energy-efficient windows.

In 2006, we started our commemorative brick sidewalk.

In 2007, our building was declared a New York state and federal historic building.

Why is this important?

Cathy Jimenez of the state Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation said, “The museum is a great example of adaptive reuse of a building, balancing historic preservation with economic development.”

Constructed in the 1890s, our five-story brick building’s Romanesque Revival exterior remains imposing, the period’s charm inside features a decoratively paneled central oak staircase, fourteen foot high ceilings sheathed in fancy pressed tin, and loft windows.

It means continuing to add new exhibits.

In 2008, we installed new energy efficient lighting and new roof signs. In 2009, we installed an LED interactive playdance floor, two TouchScreen history exhibits, and an interactive Lionel train table.

In 2010-11, we plan to finish our Surround Sound Theatre, add bathrooms on the third floor, install an LEED green roof, build an eco-system and a fifth-floor planetarium.

Thus the importance of our Children’s Museum, and all children’s museums — building on the shoulders of those who’ve gone before, inviting others to join as they move into the future.

As with other children’s museums, we will keep providing resources of value to our community’s tourism and quality of life efforts.

That means not just surviving, but thriving, even in difficult times.

Marlene B. Brown is executive director of the Children’s Museum, 311 Main St., Utica.

Visit the museum’s Web site at www.museum4kids.net