



OPINION

Guest column: Children's Museum still a 'treasure'

Fri, Dec 5, 2003

When I was invited to join the board of directors of The Children's Museum in 1999, I had no idea how much it would change the direction of my life, as well as that of the museum. Upon assuming the role of executive director in mid-2002, I faced one of the biggest challenges of my life. To be a part of an institution the Observer-Dispatch called "a community treasure" has been a rewarding experience. My background as a teacher, business futurist and grandmother served me well as we moved forward with energy and enthusiasm.

Permanently chartered by the state Board of Regents, the museum is a hands-on learning center with emphasis on local history, environmental science, the arts, space and science. Our 24 educational enrichment programs enhance learning for children of all ages. Located in the historic Main Street district of downtown Utica between majestic Union Station and Bagg's Square Memorial Park, the location is near the ancient fording place of the Mohawk River and the site of Old Fort Schuyler. With four floors encompassing a total of 24,000 square feet of exhibition space, the museum has hundreds of exhibits for kids of all ages -- including the only permanent exhibit of the history and origins of the Mohawk Valley.

One of the oldest children's museums in the country, the 40-year history of the Children's Museum of Utica is one of continuing concern for and from the community. In October 1963, members of The Junior League (including Melva Max, Mackie Kernan and Alice Pender O'Shea) had the foresight to begin this wonderful asset. Originally called the Junior Museum of Oneida County, our museum began in the basement of the Utica Public Library. It consisted of 1 exhibit, an Iroquois Longhouse, still on display. The idea of a museum for area children caught on quickly and the museum started to grow. In October 1965, it moved to the former Department of Parks and Recreation Building at Memorial Parkway and Oneida Street. In its nine-year stay there, the museum developed a variety of permanent exhibits and range of educational programs. Interest increased steadily and in November 1974, the museum moved to the upstairs of the Valley View Country Club. This new location provided badly needed space for the many exhibits, storage and a gift shop. In 1975, the name of the organization was changed to Mohawk Valley Museum.

Four years later, the museum moved to its current location. The former John C. Heiber Dry Goods Building at 311 Main St. was purchased (with a loan) for \$35,000. At this time, the name changed to The Children's Museum of History, Natural History and Science. The board took as its mission: Learn, experience, create." The five-story brick building, constructed at the turn of the century, once drew dry goods customers from as far away as Albany and Syracuse. The Romanesque Revival exterior is as imposing as ever, and the charm remains inside with the decoratively paneled central oak staircase, original glass and wood paneled office and 14-foot-high pressed tin ceiling. For years, three of the five floors were used for exhibits and programs.

In 2002, the mortgage was paid off, the fourth floor was opened and the name was changed to The Children's Museum of History, Natural History, Science & Technology. The board added to its mission: "An enjoyable educational experience for kids of all ages."

That year we became headquarters for the International Halls of Fame for bicycling, rowing, canoeing and kayaking, and -- with the help of Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-New Hartford -- became the only museum in the country to be adopted by NASA and the Department of Energy's Office of Science. Future plans call for opening our fifth floor and putting an observatory and planetarium on our roof.

Marlene B. Brown is executive director of The Children's Museum in Utica.