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Goodbye Kahuna, hello museum

By *BETSY PRICE*
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Twenty-two summers ago, Marion Hamermesh stood in a Minneapolis children's museum and watched her 2 1/2-year-old son stand in line to play with a crane exhibit.

She was so surprised that it had caught the active child's attention and that he actually waited patiently for a chance to play twice, she returned to Delaware determined to help found a children's museum here.

On Monday, shovels in the sand will mark the start of construction on the Delaware Children's Museum at the former site of Kahunaville on the Riverfront. But don't think that means the two-decade-old campaign steered mostly by stay-at-home moms has crossed its finish line.

"This is not the end," says Bill Smith, a museum board member from Centreville. "This is the beginning. This is just the start of a long involvement with Delaware."

The \$13.5 million museum, which will feature seven themed exhibits, is expected to draw 135,000 visitors a year. Museum officials are keeping the exact opening date a surprise to be revealed during Monday's 10:30 a.m. groundbreaking ceremony.

The children of the original supporters are all in their 20s now, and the children of the second wave of board members are easily in their teens.

"I think this is how children's museums are developed," says Karen Townsend of Hockessin, who has been involved for 14 years. "It's a matter of having people who are committed, passionate, have the time and the desire to make it happen."

Her kids now are 21 and 18.

"I have a feeling they will be bringing their children to the children's museum," she says.

Board President Lisa Lessner believes the process itself taught her now 12-, 14- and 16-year-old kids a lot. She's been on the board for 13 years.

"I feel proud to show them how a group of volunteers can really make a difference," says Lessner, of North Wilmington. "The collective dream and vision finally coming true is just an amazing feeling."

Hamermesh, who spent a decade on the project and turned the reins over to Lessner, agrees.

"My kids both have strong leadership skills, and I'm sure that part of that has come from watching me and my husband," Hamermesh says. "They have grown up in a household where we take action, we take leadership, and the museum is just one example of that."

Hamermesh credits Lessner and all the other volunteers for seeing the project through. Hamermesh won't be able to be at the groundbreaking Monday because she has to be at the University of Pennsylvania, where she's in residency training to be a chaplain.

She laughs when asked if the campaign to found the museum led her down that path.

"I am at a place in my life where I want to do face-to-face service, as opposed to organizational involvement with good stuff," Hamermesh says.

Gov. Jack Markell, Lt. Gov. Matt Denn, Sens. Tom Carper and Ted Kaufman, U.S. Rep. Mike Castle, New Castle County Executive Chris Coons, Wilmington Mayor Jim Baker and Riverfront Development Corp. head Mike Purzycki are expected to attend. They also are expected to wear the fanciest yellow hard hats ever, designed by Wilmington artist Nancy Josephson to emphasize childhood-related symbolism.

The museum, which has raised \$12.5 million of its \$13.5 million opening costs, will feature exhibits on biology, body power, technology, the environment, banking, transportation and art in 37,000 square feet. It's considered phase one of construction.

If it's successful, the second phase would include a huge outdoor science playground, and an additional indoor exhibit on buildings and construction. The museum board originally planned to include both of those in the first phase, but cut back as the economy soured.

"My biggest hope is that we will continue to gain funding and that it will be such an exciting experience for parents, children, grandchildren and tourists that they will come back to the museum," Lessner says. "That it won't be a one-shot deal and that as the children grow, they will experience the exhibits in different ways."

She'll have the support of Janet Sydnor of Lewes, mother of a 5-year-old boy. As part of the Moms Club of Rehoboth Beach, she and her friends plan to head to Wilmington often.

"Stay-at-home moms are always looking for the opportunity to get your kids out with other children and to discover together," she says. "That's why we stay home with them."

Khary Dewitt, a financial manager at J.P. Morgan Chase and father of a 3-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son, will head the museum's Dads Around Delaware program, designed to interest men in bringing their children.

"I don't think there's a lot of opportunity in Wilmington or Delaware as a whole for getting together with your kids in a nice, safe environment," says Dewitt, who is thrilled to be able to walk to the museum from his Historic Quaker Hill home.

As a city resident, he has bigger hopes than just getting dads in.

"I hope it becomes a community pillar, a place the community can lean on, whether it's schools, community centers, churches -- a place where you can take kids and keep them involved and off the street," he says.

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

Delaware Children's Museum groundbreaking

Where: 550 Justison St., Wilmington (former site of Kahunaville)

When: 10:30 a.m. Monday. Speeches and program start at 11.

For more information: 654-2340; www.delawarechildrensmuseum.org



Julie Van Blarcom, executive director of the Delaware Children's Museum, is overjoyed as the Kahunaville volcano comes down.

The News Journal/ ROBERT CRAIG



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