Children's Museum takes playful approach to learning



HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

A two-story climbing structure, above, forms the heart of the new Children's Museum of the Upstate. The custom-made climber, which is wheelchair-accessible, is suspended from the ceiling. Julie Accetta, left, development associate for the museum, and Carol Scott, president and CEO, explore the structure. The museum will hold its grand opening on Friday, July 31.

Grand opening on July 31 expected to draw families from wide area

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Several years and millions of dollars and countless hours in the making, the Children's Museum of the Upstate is set to open July 31 as a world-class destination for families near and far.

"What's extraordinary about this museum? Everything," said Patti Drum, vice president of design for Lexington Design + Fabrication, the Los Angeles-based company that designed and built most of the museum's exhibits.

"This is really taking the content to a higher level for a typical children's museum, and the experiences themselves are a higher quality," she said.

Take, for example, the Formula 1 racing simulator in the Start Your En-

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gines exhibit.

"We were really cognizant about the fact that kids can race in their home, and they have their Wiis and they have all these different driving experiences," Drum said. "We actually went to real racecar drivers and worked with them. The software on that racecar is an actual piece of software that's used for Formula 1 racecar drivers.

"The fact that we worked with them to actually take that software and adjust it and make it useable for this museum is really top-notch, as opposed to just finding a piece of software that's out there."

The 18 permanent, interactive exhibits are designed to meet kids on their level in a variety of ways.

"It's child-driven, as opposed to being fact-driven," said Carol Scott, museum president and CEO. "The purpose is to really promote curiosity and questioning in children and a place for children to learn regardless of how they learn."

"There's different styles of exhibits to actually speak to those different needs," Drum said. "It's really interesting to watch kids in here, because there'll always be the ones who really are very physical, and so they'll be on the climber and they'll be on the pulleys.

"And then you have ones that are more analytical," who get engaged with different activities, she said. "Watching the different styles of the kids and how they gravitate towards different things, it was really fun."

All the exhibits are designed to be wheelchair-accessible, said Scott, including an access ramp on the second story of the massive climbing structure in the heart of the museum.

Scott said the museum is geared primarily for children ages 6 to 11, a slightly older age group than is targeted in many children's museums.

"It was very clear that the stronger need was for school-age children," she said.

Younger kids, though, aren't left out. Three exhibits are designed specifically for preschoolers and toddlers, and nearly all exhibits have elements that will intrigue and entertain a variety of ages.

In fact, Drum said, adults will probably get a kick out of it too.

"We wanted also to make the exhibits a little bit more sophisticated so it also engages the parents," she said. "We're really looking at a family audience here. It's not just for the children."

At a recent pre-opening event for volunteers, dads were competing with their kids to get a turn in the racecar, she said.

The opening of the Children's Museum of the Upstate is a decade-long plan finally come to fruition. The building was donated in December 2003, and the official capital campaign got underway in June 2004.

"It's really been conceptualized probably another five years before that," Scott said.

It took $21.7 million to turn the 79,000-square-foot former library into a museum that Scott expects will attract visitors to Greenville from well beyond the Upstate.

"In places where children's museums exist, they are considered major town centers," Scott said. "They become a safe, family-oriented, educational extension in the communities."

In addition to the permanent exhibits, the museum features space for traveling exhibits, outdoor garden and art exhibits, an amphitheater and extensive programming in arts, science and humanities for ages 2 to 15.

Drum, who described the museum as a "hybrid between a children's museum and a science museum," said she would consider the museum a success if kids were crying when it was time to leave.

"Sorry, Greenville parents," she said with a laugh.

The Children's Museum of the Upstate will be open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays to Saturdays and 1-5 p.m. Sundays beginning July 31.

Admission is $12 per person. For the first six months, the museum will feature a "two for two" special the third Thursday of each month — visit the museum for two hours from 5 to 7 p.m. for $2 per person.

For more information on the museum, visit www.tcmgreenvillesc.org.