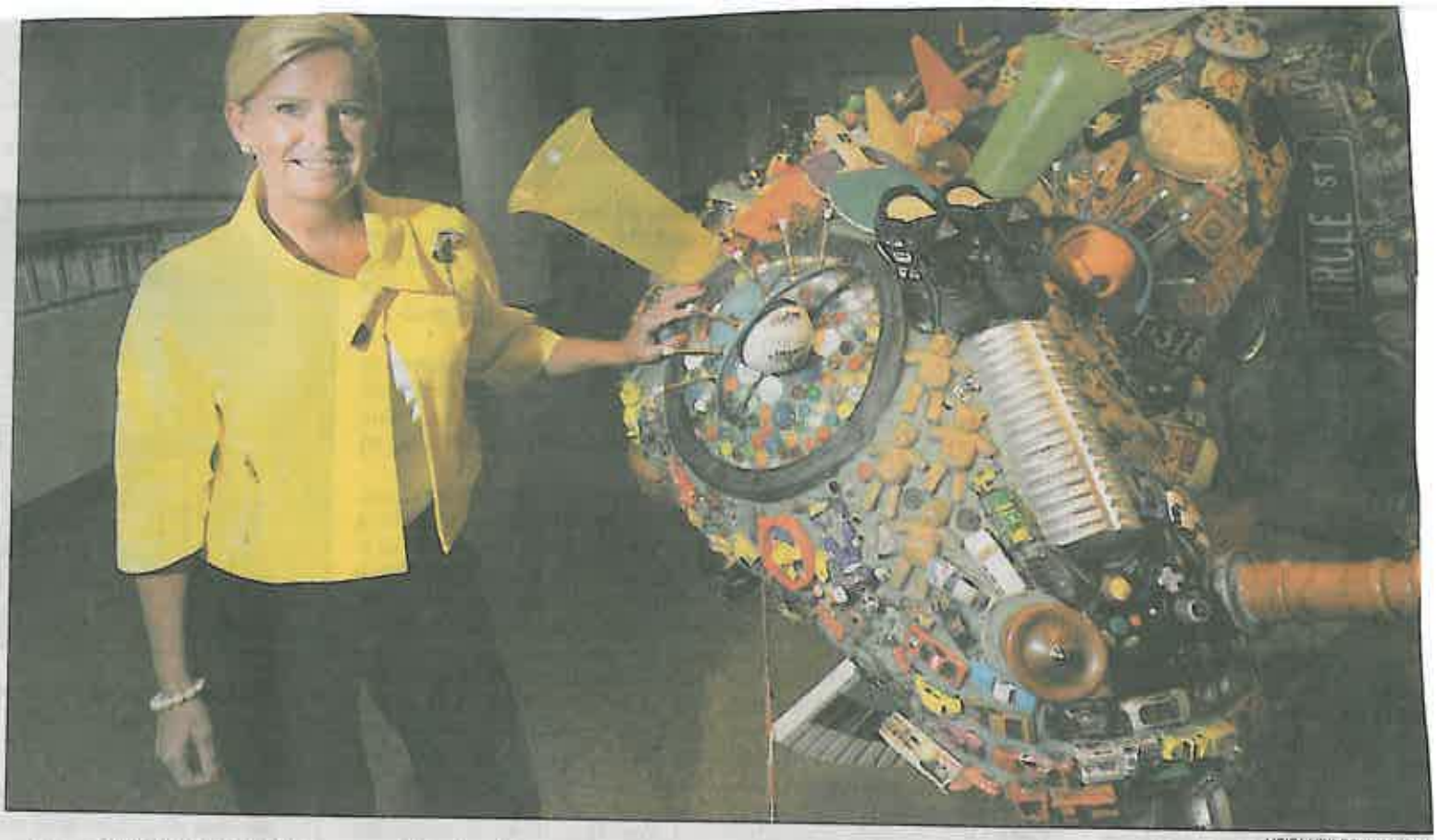


HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Mary Sellers has spent 20 years working in science museums in Iowa and Florida. The new president and CEO of the Upstate Children's Museum has been on the job in Greenville for about two weeks.

For Upstate Children's Museum's new leader, it's all about learning

By Lillia Callum-Penso
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Noise has never much bothered Mary Sellers. The new president and CEO of the Upstate Children's Museum is at ease walking through throngs of kids who are excitedly exploring the hands-on exhibits. After 20 years in the museum world, Sellers has grown accustomed to what she calls "the sounds of learning."

The hands-on learning concept is the thing that has kept her in science museums throughout her career, from The Science Center of Iowa to the Orlando Science Center to The South Florida Science Museum.

It might seem an odd path for someone who admits to not liking science much as a kid, but sometimes, says Sellers, it just takes the right kind of materials.

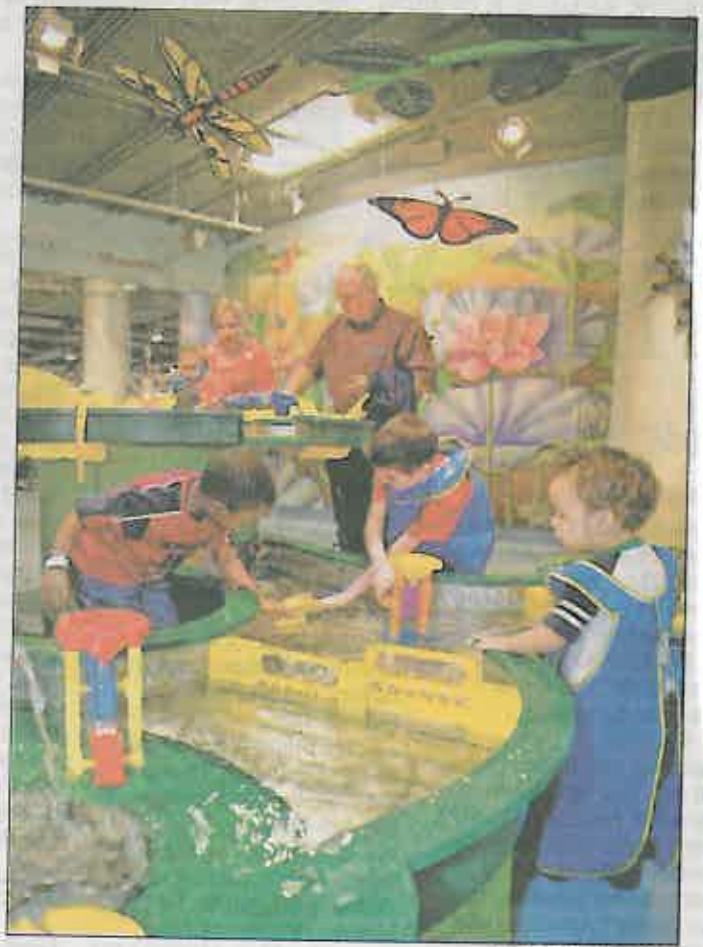
"There are some complex principles that are on the floor here .... You see these 4- and 5-year-olds and they start experimenting, and they may not have the formal word for what they're doing, but they can tell you about erosion, but in 4- and 5-year-old terms."

The 44-year-old Sellers, a Michigan native, says it wasn't until she discovered the Detroit Museum of Industry that she realized she "wasn't bad at science." It was merely that the vehicle used to convey it wasn't working.

And with just two weeks on the job in Greenville, she already has a vision for a community center of learning that is fun for both children and adults.

"Adults are learning how their children learn, and they're learning a few things themselves," Sellers says. "I learned I can pull myself up in the gears and levers section."

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PATRICK COLLARD / Staff

The noisy sounds of children experimenting and learning are "a nice side benefit" of the job, Sellers says.

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MUSEUM

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Sellers' vision for the museum includes extending the learning process beyond its walls. She'd like to build more exhibits like the WTCM recording studio, which allows children to take home something they create. And that's part of Sellers' other vision for the museum, becoming "a critical element of the community and a critical resource for families."

She would like to expand the museum's community outreach through partnerships with local business, cultural and social agencies. The museum plans to launch a scholarship program for Title I schools in the coming year. The relationship is invaluable, says Sellers, in becoming a viable and lasting part of a community.

When the museum's board was looking for someone to take over former CEO Jill Scott's role, it wanted someone who could fill two roles, says board Chairman James Jones: someone with business acumen who could manage, but also someone with a vision for furthering the museum's reach in the community. Among the six candidates the board interviewed, Sellers stood out, Jones says.

"When I was introducing her to the staff I told them this: If you had just looked at her résumé, that would have been enough. If you had just met her and saw what type of person she was, that would have been enough. If you sat down and listened to her vision and where she could take this museum, that would have been enough. Put all three things together, and it was a very easy decision to make."

On a Wednesday afternoon after a night of no sleep, Sellers is surprisingly alert. When a flight from Florida was canceled due to bad weather, she drove back to Greenville, arriving at 5 a.m. At 1:30 p.m., she has been in meetings all morning and has a few more scheduled for the afternoon. A barely eaten salad sits atop the desk in a half-unpacked office. But Sellers seems unfazed by the kid frenzy around her and admits only to a love of Diet Mountain Dew.

The kids' cacophony is "actually a nice side benefit, to go out on the floor and they're screaming and they're learning," says Sellers, the youngest of six kids.

"I come from a very big family," she says with a laugh. "So this is like being at Thanksgiving at my house, coming to work every day."

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