

A VISION AWAITING FULFILLMENT FAMILY MUSEUM BACKERS HAVE IDEAS, SEEK FUNDING

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Abstract:

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After more than a year, the museum is built only on brochures and good intentions. That's fine with van der Veen, the museum's executive director, who knew she'd be in for several years of work when she committed herself to the project in July 1998.

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Full Text:

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Imagine a place popular with young children that does not include tubes, slides, meals with toys or other elements of potential parental torture.

Think of a youth-oriented destination that not only tolerates mom and dad but appeals to them. A creative playground for kids 8 and younger that is so much fun, they never realize they're learning valuable social and educational skills. Stealth learning, so to speak.

Such a place exists if only in the minds of Kim van der Veen and her many friends and colleagues who are working toward the creation of the Phoenix Family Museum. Convinced there is a place in the real world for such a venture, they've recruited donors, volunteers and assorted experts to make it happen.

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Van der Veen, with young children herself, thought there might be a way to fill the void. She wanted to give something back to the community, but she also had a personal interest.

"This is about building memories," van der Veen says. "A visit to a museum is a defining moment, something kids always remember. I want something like that for my kids in Phoenix."

She quickly found others willing to help. Committees were formed. Teachers, school counselors and psychologists were asked for opinions. Research of other children's museums around the country was conducted.

The Phoenix Family Museum slowly took shape.

The vision came into focus. It should be a place geared to children but appealing to adults (thus the "Family" of the title). Kids should be able to explore and discover without adults hovering nearby ready to say, "Don't touch," "Not so loud," and other common parentisms. Moms and dads should be intrigued enough to be involved in play, rather than acting more as security guards ready to avert potential disaster.

Gretchen Freeman, a consultant in Phoenix who heads the museum's board, wanted most a place beyond the many commercial amusements now offered children.

"It seems every place you take your child, they play games and everything is so competitive," Freeman says. The only thing kids might learn, she says, is how many tickets are needed for plastic dinosaurs or squirt guns.

Freeman wanted a place free of such strong commercial angles, a museum that teaches children things other than mass merchandising and brand loyalty.

Planners want the museum in downtown Phoenix. In the past several months, they've developed a general floor plan.

The museum likely will be laid out like a neighborhood, with four zones arranged around a grand intersection (which will teach children to look both ways before crossing, lest they be hit by an imaginary firetruck).

One zone will be dedicated to children 3 and younger, where they can touch, climb, stack and pour without fear of colliding with large masses 4 years old and larger.

Another area would be dedicated to careers, where kids could dress up without fear of actually having to earn a living. There might be a grocery store, a fire department, a police station and a post office, with plenty of costumes for all. There could be a stage for impromptu plays with parents as the enthusiastic audience (certainly type-casting).

The third zone would be dedicated to cultural diversity. Children would visit small homes representing peoples of the world, where they'd try on clothes, listen to music and play with toys related to the culture.

The fourth zone would encourage creativity. Children would paint, sculpt, cut and paste with the assistance of volunteer artists. Youthful creators would be safe in the knowledge that if they spill something, it will land on flooring not owned by their parents.

They might be issued ponchos depending upon the mess potential, or simply hosed off when the activity is done. (Actually the hose-based cleaning system, while a good idea, isn't feasible, van der Veen admits.)

This is where the Phoenix Family Museum ends. It has no building, few funds and an undiscernable timetable. What it does have is a slew of believers willing to donate time and effort. They remain confident it won't be long before hopes and dreams are outnumbered by grants and donations.

"If it happens within three years, we'll be happy," van der Veen says. "Five years, not as happy. But we're not going to give up. It's too important."

Chart Photo by Sherrie Buzby/The Arizona Republic; Caption: Phoenix Family Museum For more information about the proposed hands-on museum for children and parents, contact the organizers at (602) 253-0501 or visit its Web site at az.arts.asu/familymuse. The museum is seeking donations, ideas and volunteers. Phoenix Family Museum volunteer Angela Cazel-Jahn (left), shown with museum executive director Kim van der Veen, painted this mural to show how they envision the museum would be.

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