

12 years later, LaunchPAD Children's Museum comes to life

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- Justin Wan, Sioux City Journal

Avery Tenhulzen, 3, of Sioux City, plays with rice in an interactive grain elevator model at LaunchPAD Children's Museum.

- Justin Wan, Sioux City Journal

A kid-sized LiteBrite display was a hit at the LaunchPAD Children's Museum preview party.

- Justin Wan, Sioux City Journal

Siouxland's LaunchPAD Children's Museum provides an interactive educational experience that fosters a child's creativity and imagination, all in a safe and stimulating environment. The year-round opportunities for learning include participatory exhibits and innovative programs for children.

SIOUX CITY | Twelve years ago, Debbie Bernstein LaCroix, then pregnant with her son, William, talked to three other mothers about bringing a hub for education and creativity for youth to Siouxland.

Last week, William, now 12, saw the reality of more than a decade of planning and work by supporters of the LaunchPAD

Children's Museum.

On the night of Feb. 4, Debbie noticed William's big grin as he pulled a lever to operate a makeshift grain pit -- just one of the many interactive exhibits at the new museum in downtown Sioux City.

"It's for people who like technology and working together," William said of the exhibit.

William and his mother were among 250 donors and supporters who attended a preview party for the museum last Thursday. The \$6.9 million facility at 623 Pearl St. opens to the general public on Thursday.

Bernstein LaCroix, who lives in Dakota Dunes, brainstormed the initial idea for the museum alongside Brandy TenHulzen, Lily Higman and Jenny Uhl.

"It's been really fun watching it come together," Bernstein LaCroix, 40, said. "It's like having a baby and showing it off to everybody. Knowing we didn't give up is a very gratuitous feeling."

Bernstein LaCroix and TenHulzen, of Sergeant Bluff, both serve on the museum's board of directors.

"This is everything and more than we imagined it to be," said TenHulzen, 42, whose daughters were ages 1 and 3 when the mothers first began discussing a children's museum in Sioux City. Her daughter, Madison is now 14, and daughter, Breanna, is 16.

Bob Fitch, the museum's executive director, said the facility emphasizes agriculture, food sources and the environment. The focus alludes to Siouxland's agricultural industries and history.

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As of Feb. 4, Fitch said, more than 400 families have purchased memberships. In the museum's name, PAD stands for "Play and Discover," which signifies the facility's opportunities for youths.

The \$6 million museum also features exhibits focused on science, technology, engineering and math. Many were influenced by the community including members of the Sioux City and South Sioux City school districts.

One of the popular exhibits involves a moving stream of water with boats and bridges to show the impact of the Missouri River and how surrounding tributaries affect everyday life.

"Part of it is to just help teach kids the importance of water in our environment," Fitch said. "Then, also it helps kids learn how water moves and flows."

More than a decade ago, TenHulzen took her daughters to the Iowa Children's Museum in Coralville, Iowa, and watched as they fell in love with the facility's educational exhibits. She said the children's museum will help draw people to Sioux City.

"It's going to keep young people in town and bring people here," TenHulzen said.

During the preview event last week, Matt Brossard, 39, of Orange City, Iowa, visited the museum with his son, Joseph, 11.

Brossard said they have visited similar museums in Minnesota.

“It’s nice having something like this nearby,” Brossard said. “It’s something you don’t see every day.”

Joseph said he enjoyed the construction of the water exhibits.

“I like how it’s built,” Joseph said. “The water creates ripples and stuff.”