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CHILDREN'S
MUSEUM OF
MEMPHIS



A SHORT HISTORY

Serendipity & Dreams Set the Project in Motion, By Mary George Beggs The Commercial Appeal, June 10, 1990

An article in an airline magazine helped plant the seed for The Children's Museum of Memphis.

Harriet McFadden was on a plane and happened to read an article about the Children's Museum of Boston. She was so taken with the idea of a children's museum for Memphis that she pursued it.

"I called the museum when I was in Boston and asked if there was someone who could show me around," she said. "They put me in touch with a member of the board of trustees who spent about three hours with me."

Meanwhile, Mars Widdicombe, who is from Boston and grew up with the children's museum there, also had a dream of starting a children's museum in Memphis and had been in touch with the Boston museum. As it turned out, the trustee who showed McFadden around is a friend of Widdicombe's. She sent Widdicombe a note that McFadden had been there, and the Memphians got together in the fall of 1985 to talk about their mutual dream. They were acquaintances who live a few blocks apart, but neither knew the other was interested in starting a children's museum.

Widdicombe and McFadden called on Polly Glotzbach to join forces with them. "We didn't know her, but we had heard such wonderful things about her," Widdicombe said. Glotzbach had just completed her term as president of The Junior League of Memphis.

"I had been with my family to Magic House, the children's museum in St. Louis," Glotzbach said. "It came home to me how great it would be to have a children's museum here, plus how fun it would be to be in on something in the early stages."

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The three founders began a thorough research of other children's museums across the country. "We piled up a wonderful collection of information that saved us miles once we began to develop," said Glotzbach. "We were able to learn about problems this museum could avoid."

Their original idea was to have the museum located in the Memphis Pink Palace Museum, but when those plans failed to come about the founders and other volunteers they had picked up along the way began to look for other sites.

First they had to do those things that are "not very interesting," as Widdicombe put it. "We had to set up bylaws and a charter and things like that – the drudge work." The museum was incorporated in April 1987.

That July they hired Ann Tribble Butterfield, who had been with the Boston Children's Museum and was a children's museum consultant.

Doug Noble, director of the Memphis Pink Palace Museum, was enormously helpful from the beginning, the three women said. "He always took the time to look over our projects," Widdicombe said. "He thought of the Cityscape concept."

One big milestone in the development of the museum came when the founders and other volunteers went to see Mayor Dick Hackett with their proposal in August 1988.

"We hadn't even finished when he said, 'Close your books. You've convinced me. Let's get in my car and go find a site,'" Widdicombe said.

Architect Charles Shipp had already suggested the National Guard Armory. "Once we saw the building we knew this was it," Glotzbach said. They signed a 25-year lease on the building with the city the following November, renting it for \$1 a year.

The next major milestone came in the funding. The group received its first unrestricted gift for \$25,000 from Trammell Crow Co. that year. Later the Plough Foundation gave a \$300,000 challenge gift.

Last spring, Jeanne Finan was hired as executive director of the new museum. "She began Virginia Discovery Museum, the children's museum in Charlottesville, Virginia, eight years ago, so she had experience in founding and running a children's museum," Glotzbach said.

Five years ago, the founders say, they never dreamed their project would take on such proportions so quickly.

"One of the most exciting things to me is how the project has grown from a few women around the kitchen table to a large group of people," said Glotzbach. "Initially I felt we were pushing a rock up a hill and could stop when we wanted to, but it took on such momentum we were soon racing after it."

"Every little hurdle was something to celebrate," said McFadden. "But we never envisioned the project being so big. Once the mayor got us our site, our goal changed from opening a children's museum to having the best children's museum in the country."