

# Kids Go Green! Environmental Learning Center and Garden and the future of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 12, 2010)

As we bring to a close the series of *Historically Speaking* columns on the history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, I have asked the Executive Director, Mary Ann Damos, to share her thoughts about the museum's future. I also asked her to describe the improvements planned for the grounds surrounding the museum. She has provided some great insights into the plans and future directions of the museum. First the grounds, then the future plans.

Improvements are planned in the parking area and to the rear of the building.

Mary Ann said of the major effort intended for the back of the building, "The Children's Museum of Oak Ridge plans to address a need in the community to provide children and families a place to learn to be better caretakers of the earth and to encourage healthy outdoor activities. The museum has undertaken the creation of a **'Kids Go Green! Environmental Learning Center and Garden.'**"

"The center will serve the children and families of East Tennessee by providing an outdoor space that will encourage children to participate in nature related activities, learn about the natural world, perform scientific investigation and experiments and engage in healthy play. During the past 4 years, the museum has been conducting community perception surveys and feasibility studies for museum expansion. One topic that received much support was promoting activities that have to do with science. For the past 3 years, the museum has identified environmental studies and healthy living as high priority issues.

"The garden plans include raised beds for planting vegetables, herbs and flowers, birdhouses, an insect garden, a garden shed, a rock garden, a composting center, a meadow area, a rain garden, an observation deck, a nature-craft work station, a tool shed and outdoor classroom areas. The center will connect with other Museum exhibits such as the Appalachian Heritage Exhibit and will incorporate National and Tennessee curriculum standards in its educational materials. Educational programming in-house and as outreach will be developed by a Museum educator with a background in horticulture. Educational programming will include the study of nature, eco-action, weather, healthy nutrition, organic gardening, food preparation, and other related subjects. The garden will be wheelchair and stroller accessible from all Museum classrooms and within the garden.

"The Children's Museum is partnering with the University of Tennessee Gardens to help oversee the development and the maintenance of the garden using the expertise of their Executive Director, Sue Hamilton, as well as shared staff including an intern. In addition, Fuhrman Landscaping owner Mark Fuhrman will be working closely with the museum to oversee the installation and future care of the garden.

"The ¾ of an acre back lot of the museum is, for the most part, unusable at this time and not an asset to the museum or the surrounding neighborhood. This project would create a space that would bring exciting educational value to families in the East Tennessee area and make a now dead space, beneficial to children and families through the creation of an environmental learning center and garden and the accompanying educational programming. The garden would provide a place for children to explore, learn and get acquainted with nature and teach family activities such as gardening and nature observation that would increase their time spent outdoors, instill a love of nature and encourage involvement in the care of our earth.

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Wow, what an amazing project! Watch as Mark and others bring together Mary Ann's dreams for a "Kids go Green!" garden at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. All this is being made possible through a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Museums for America as well as donations from foundations and individuals.

Next let's look at what Mary Ann and her staff envision for the future of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

Mary Ann said, "The future of Children's Museum looks bright and exciting. We have many projects in the works as well as long-range plans for the future.

"During the past 10 years, we have seen many changes taking place within the museum that include updating the Early Oak Ridge Exhibits, a wheelchair and stroller accessible ramp installed with plans for future ramps, the creation of the Train Garden and the World of Trains exhibits, refinishing of the floors, redesign of the After School Club Room by Leadership Oak Ridge and a mural by artist Jane Cartwright, the Rainforest, the Dollhouse & Century Toy Store and hallway toy exhibit, the redesign of the Early Oak Ridge Exhibit to include a guard tower and 1940s cemento living room thanks to exhibit designer Margaret Allard, the ongoing construction of a tugboat in the Waterworks by volunteer Frank Peishel, redesign of the preschool room to reflect a 1940s classroom through a donation from Boeing, the redesigning of the front lobby with a mural by artist Joyce Gralak, a new storage area for the museum's 20,000 artifact collection, a new sound system and tables and chairs in the gym for special events donated by Dr. & Mrs. Jim Giles, and many more wonderful upgrades throughout the building.

"Some very special projects within the last two years include the redesigning of the Appalachian exhibit through a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services. This not only included beautiful new cases, an interactive computer program, a stage for performances, refurbishing of the log cabins but also the digitization of over 100 audiovisuals of Appalachian folk life that were in the museum's collection. The museum received 2 awards for this exhibit the Award of Excellence from the Tennessee Association of Museums and the Award of Excellence from the Southeastern Museum Association.

"Another special project is the Kids Go Green! Environmental Learning Center and Garden made possible through a grant from the Institute from Museum and Library Services, the Ergen Family Foundation, and Viola Ergen. The garden is in honor of Viola Ergen who has been associated with the museum for many years, serving as the business manager and now a volunteer. The Rotary Club of Oak Ridge and Clayton Foundation have also sponsored planting beds in the garden for children to plant and harvest vegetables and herbs. This project is just getting underway and will present many wonderful educational experiences for children and families.

"The future of the museum will include as its focus projects that involve the arts through our long association with the Tennessee Arts Commission, environmental studies, international cultures, and history. We will continue to upgrade our exhibits and our wonderful 1940s Highland View School building. We will continue to work with the school systems in surrounding counties through tours and outreach programs.

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"We will continue to build on and expand our successful International Festival and Celebration of the Young Child as well as our classes and Imagination Station Summer Camp.

"In the immediate future, the community can look for dramatic changes to the outside of the building and grounds with the addition of our beautiful garden in the back and a new parking lot and landscaping in the front to better welcome visitors to Oak Ridge and the museum.

"We could not have accomplished any of these things except for the contributions of our generous donors and dedicated volunteers and staff. The museum is constantly grateful for those that care enough to help create a place where children can learn, play and grow through interactive exhibits, exciting classes and special events that kindle the imagination and challenge the intellect. It is our intent that Children's Museum's future will seek to meet the needs of the surrounding community and region through its programming to improve, inspire and enrich the lives of children and their families.

I hope you have enjoyed the extended series of articles on the history of OUR Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. It has been a pleasure for me to research and write. I have gotten so much help from so many people, my thanks to you all!



Margaret Allard provides a photo of the interim situation where all trees and other plants have been removed from the Children's Museum grounds in preparation for the new parking lot.