

Ten years ago, the people who dreamt of building a world-class children's museum in Michigan's Great Lakes Bay region faced some stiff challenges—primarily the loss of automotive industry jobs and its effect on every aspect of the region's economy. While children's museums, especially start-ups, have been dealing with the recent national economic decline, we have been working in a microcosm of that environment for the past decade. But, after a long, intense and up-and-down fundraising effort, the 23,000-square-foot Mid-Michigan Children's Museum (MMCM), complete with eight exhibits and a \$700,000 annual operating budget, opened in June 2008 to great acclaim and community support. Located in a landmark building in downtown Saginaw, it provides much needed economic development stimulus for the region. But more importantly, this children's museum is a place that the entire region can be proud of because everyone helped build it, helped shape its contents and can share in the feeling that they have done the very best for their children.

Our volunteer group committed early on to build a museum that featured high aesthetics and a program of learning through discovery. The group refused to compromise, regardless of the economic outlook, leadership changes and other obstacles. Articulating the full scope and mission of the museum plan was the most difficult part of the fundraising process. Ultimately it was decided that MMCM would be a regional effort to attract both audience and funding from a broad geographic path.

It may sound corny, but basically our case boiled down to “what can we do for our children that's safe, organized and educational?” The combination of kids and education attracted the attention of the first major donor. Once donors understood what we were trying to accomplish, they were very generous. The volunteer group raised nearly \$6 million—proof that persistence pays off.

Facing Economic Realities

We're all experiencing the pain of the current economic crisis, which challenges museums and other organizations not to rely too heavily on local philanthropy to survive. We're all competing for support at a time



Visitors on Boys and Girls Club Day enjoy the bright new exhibits at the Mid-Michigan Children's Museum.

to people—and businesses—looking to relocate. A compelling museum in the heart of the city would certainly help achieve that goal.

Generosity of Prime Movers

The museum fundraising project got off the ground in late 1999 with the donation of the original downtown Garber Buick dealership building on the Saginaw River by longtime city supporter Richard Garber. The configuration of the fifty-year-old historic building—large, unpartitioned space that had been used for sales and service, with a large parking area—was a good fit for a museum.

The building came with a long list of positives and a few significant negatives. It sits very close to the main expressway linking I-75 with downtown Saginaw, and it is also close to a wide variety of youth-related facilities. The Children's Zoo at Celebration Square, Saginaw Art Museum, Temple Theatre and Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy, a public school for gifted students from ages six to twelve, are all within three miles of the museum. Saginaw, the largest and most centrally located city in the tri-county region, also has a large community of economically disadvantaged children. The founding board also thought it very important for the museum to be a part of the downtown riverfront revitalization area, to act as an anchor for the development of several other empty parcels around the site. Many volunteers joined the cause for that very reason.

On the other side of the ledger, locating the museum in downtown Saginaw presented some marketing and fundraising difficulties. The cities of Bay City, Midland and Saginaw form an inverted triangle in the east central part of the state, with Saginaw at the bottom point, Midland about thirty-five miles northwest and Bay City about twenty-five miles slightly northeast. Despite their geographic proximity, the cities differ greatly in terms of community makeup. Saginaw is located on the major route leading to the northern Michigan recreational areas just beyond Bay City. Midland, home to Dow Chemical, one of the museum's primary donors, and Bay City are smaller but more affluent. Commuters regularly travel between cities to work, attend school and for professional appointments or to access recreation venues.

Running on Empty

A New Museum Opens in a Region the Automotive Industry Left Behind

Angela Barris

Mid-Michigan Children's Museum

when grant-providing foundations—and average American families—are being pulled in many different financial directions. Here the economic reality is especially bleak. Saginaw lies in the Flint/TriCities region of Michigan and was once a thriving manufacturing center, however, tens of thousands of jobs have been lost over the last ten years. The virtual collapse of the property tax base has many local families rightfully worrying more about things like unemployment benefits and home foreclosure than the fate of a children's museum. In truth, Michigan's economy was already in recession in 1998, when the museum began its initial fundraising drive.

With so many economic factors working against the idea of a museum, it would have been easy to get discouraged. But a group of passionate grassroots volunteers accepted the responsibility of meeting with foundations and bankers to communicate our vision. The museum would be more than just a fun place to play—everything would be tied to the state educational curriculum. Teachers could use the museum as an extension of their classrooms. The fact that times *have* been so difficult in our area has been one of the main motivating factors to get the museum built. Kids here have been through so much—parents losing jobs and homes, factories and schools closing—that a vibrant, exciting, entertaining—and educational—place just for them took on greater urgency. Community leaders, especially in Saginaw, had long believed that the region needed more positive, interactive activities for young families, as a way of improving the area's quality of life and making it more attractive

Personalizing Fundraising

The next biggest fundraising hurdle was overcoming the lack of knowledge about a children's museum's scope and role. The fundraising committee used a strategy very common in political campaigns. MMCM's first CEO organized a series of introductory cocktail parties in homes of area supporters where she set up small interactive displays that showed just what the museum would be like. The displays conveyed the idea of the museum as a place for education and play, and rallied many individual donors to support the cause.

Over a six-year period, the first wave of fundraising generated \$4.2 million, still \$2

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million short of what was now needed to renovate the building and build the exhibits. When I joined the organization as the new CEO in 2007, my mission was to build on that fundraising foundation and expand the museum's reach into the community through a \$2 million capital campaign, called "Play-Dough." As the museum grew from the planning stages to construction and opening, the role of CEO evolved from strictly administrative to more public fundraising and community outreach. My experience as a college administrator, community librarian and YWCA executive director was helpful in that respect.

The fundraising committee continued to focus on individual and corporate donors through solicitations, cocktail parties and other events at the raw museum space. Volunteers organized a call night from the offices of a local investment firm bringing in more than \$30,000 as a result of personal, persuasive phone conversations. One dedicated volunteer, unable to meet at the office, made calls from her cell phone in route to an appointment in Detroit (she was a passenger in the car!). One of the most popular fundraising events, the Arts from the Heart Red Tie Auction, invited the public to visit

the museum prior to opening day to enjoy musical entertainment and refreshments while bidding on mixed media art.

On a smaller scale, a brick paving program encouraged individual and corporate donors to purchase \$75 bricks to be placed on the walkway leading into the museum. All donors are recognized on the donor wall located in the entryway, including the girl who hosted a lemonade stand, the boy who donated his Christmas gift money and the girls who requested donations to the MMCM in lieu of birthday presents.

We also recruited capital campaign members from each of the communities served by the museum, so we would have a committed champion for the museum's cause in each of those main cities. Those committee members helped open the doors to community foundations in their respective cities. Private foundations have contributed more than \$3.1 million to the capital campaign. The compelling case for education, literacy and children was made by many individual volunteers who requested contributions from family and friends. In the end, approximately 20 percent of capital campaign contributions came from individual donors, 30 percent from corporations and the rest from foundations.

Exhibits with Local Flavor

When it comes to the exhibits, our goal is to provide children with a learning environment that both challenges them and offers some familiar elements. Before we created the exhibit space, Peter and Sharon Exley from ArchitectureIsFun, Inc. in Chicago, hosted a variety of focus groups called "dream catching sessions" for the purpose of selecting regional themes that would resonate with both children and adults. The tri-county area has strong connections to the automotive industry, health care and agriculture, so it made sense to create exhibits related to those industries. Child development specialist Mary Sinker provided the educational goals, objectives and themes that ensured that the museum's educational content supports Michigan curriculum standards.

A series of galleries was created to offer children—and the adults accompanying them—a wide variety of experiences. For example, the automotive gallery features stylized versions of cars with functioning steering wheels and shifters that make recorded noises in response to a child's input as well as a kid-sized mechanic's garage with real tools. Another gallery features a pediatrician's exam room, with model human organs and information cards about them, and large X-

It was much more difficult to sell the idea of the museum to potential donors who lived in other cities in the tri-county area, both because they would have to travel much farther to take advantage of it, and because the museum would be helping the economic development of downtown Saginaw and not Bay City or Midland. In fact at one point, Midland was thinking about opening its own children's museum, but guidance from well-respected community foundations convinced museum leaders that greater need existed in Saginaw. Finally, there is no way to sugar-coat the violence that has taken place within a five-mile radius of the museum site. Potential supporters from more suburban areas were very frank in their uncertainty about bringing children into a potentially dangerous area, even in daylight hours.

A second crucial prime mover has been Dr. Samuel Shaheen, a Saginaw surgeon, commercial real estate developer and member of Saginaw Future Inc., a public/private alliance dedicated to job development. Shaheen is a pragmatic visionary with an eye toward identifying key anchors in the downtown revitalization area, which include a medical center, that makes Saginaw a more attractive place to live and work. Shaheen has been a trailblazer for our fundraising, providing crucial support in canvassing local organizations and businesses, resulting in approximately \$500,000 worth of in-kind donations. Cash-sensitive companies were able to contribute to the museum either with materials or by providing skilled labor. Among other in-kind contributions, a local construction company provided building materials and labor for the build out, and a local roofing manufacturer did the same. This was a crucial element to our fundraising and budget success, and an incredibly valuable tool for any museum trying to thrive in a difficult economic environment.

Dr. Shaheen's presence on the board reinvigorated an effort that was beginning to wear out even the most dedicated volunteers. His experience in managing commercial construction also bore fruit during the museum's design and construction process. Originally, the museum's organizing committee had agreed upon an architect and a builder for the project, which was then tagged at \$8 million. Through value engineering Dr. Shaheen found nearly \$2 million in cost savings by scrutinizing the plans and using familiar builders and local suppliers, bringing the project total down to approximately \$6 million, a figure that looked much more doable in the eyes of local foundations and supporters. That move alone tremendously boosted the project's credibility among potential funders.

rays of human and animal skeletons. An oral health exhibit features a giant set of open jaws with large teeth and braces. Children can wield a big toothbrush and brush the teeth, or jump into the mouth and play on the tongue!

The obvious local connection in these exhibits provides a strong fundraising opportunity for the museum. Garber Management, who donated the building, also sponsored the automotive exhibit, while St. Mary's of Michigan hospital backed the health care area. The exhibit space works as a cohesive unit thanks to the Exleys' warm and inviting design theme. Stylized images of children of different sizes—some as tall as a building and others life-size—stretch across the space, holding hands and playing. It provides a memorable scene for the children who visit.

While the challenge of attracting visitors to downtown Saginaw from nearby Midland and Bay City is ongoing, and the majority of museum guests are from Saginaw, we have been pleasantly surprised to record a total of slightly more than 31,000 visitors from seventeen counties in the nine months the museum has been open. That number includes 152 field trips, largely due to our standards-based content and strong connection with the school systems.

Blessed with a “car dealership mentality,” board members from the extensive lo-

cal automotive sector focused on identifying the kid-friendly competition within a fifty-mile radius (the typical distance people will travel to shop for a new car) and setting admission fees fairly high in relation to other local child-friendly venues—\$7 for visitors age two and above (\$6 for seniors sixty and older). In their words, “Aim high. You can always discount it later on, but you can't raise it.” The museum offers reciprocal discounted memberships with the local zoo. In addition to serving low-income children through school group visits, reduced admission family passes are available through local public libraries. Children's service agencies such as Boys and Girls Club, family shelters and Big Brothers Big Sisters promote the library passes to their members.

Looking to the Future

Since its grand opening last June, community response has been incredibly strong and enthusiastic. The museum is projected to serve approximately 80,000 visitors in 2009. Its current focus is to successfully complete the Play-Dough capital campaign by the end of 2009, in which a key factor is the anticipated, continued loyalty of previous MMCM donors (The museum needs \$400,000 in additional pledges in 2009 to reach the goal). The next stage of exhibit

planning involves the development of the remaining free space inside the museum and an outdoor gallery space.

Meanwhile, the economic outlook for Mid-Michigan is still quite bleak—General Motors is expected to shrink even more, jeopardizing jobs at local factories and suppliers. But the growth of the health care industry in the area and the anticipated expansion of the semiconductor plant in nearby Hemlock, closer to Midland, offers some bright lining to the persistent clouds.

Regardless of the economic uncertainty, the volunteer board and staff are ready. Their motivation comes from the exhibit floor where every day children shriek with delight while playing at a science display that features a magically suspended ping pong ball, or at the water exhibit where they can crawl into a submerged dome to see how water flows from below. These priceless experiences set children on a path that nurtures a powerful sense of curiosity that benefits the entire community.



Angela Barris has been the president and CEO of the Mid-Michigan Children's Museum for the past three years. A lifelong resident of Saginaw, Barris was previously a branch director for the local public library system and executive director of the YWCA of Bay County, Michigan.

LESSONS LEARNED

Identify the stakeholders.

- Take the time to round up a diverse core of support that is regional, economic, geographic, political and knowledgeable. Use local talent: foundations, financial institutions, educators, builders and architects to help you develop your plan.

- MMCM lost valuable time doubling back to bring regional supporters to the project. Expanding the base to include residents of the greater tri-county region resulted in an increase in donations to the capital campaign.

- Aligning the exhibits with the Michigan Education Framework and National Early Learning Standards ensured the support of educators. Teachers are willing to bring their students for an extended classroom experience. And retired teachers make up more than 40 percent of the 100+ volunteers working at MMCM.

Even in difficult economic times in communities swamped with competing needs, it is still possible to turn the dream of a children's museum into a reality. Here are some key lessons that we learned in our ten-year odyssey.

- The most successful individuals engaged in the capital campaign will tell you that they ask *everyone* for a donation. The campaign had more had 2,000 individual donors. Call nights, personal letters to friends and vendors, presentations to foundations, corporations, businesses, service clubs, educators, parties and special events all contributed to \$5.7 million of the \$6.2 million campaign.

Be ready and willing to change leadership when the campaign demands a fresh outlook.

Recognize that different times call for different skills. The board of directors eventually elected officers based on fundraising skills. A new CEO was selected prior to beginning the building renovation and the final push to complete the capital campaign. At least two board members commented that a professional fundraiser may have accelerated the campaign; however, the majority of board members listed the fact that the campaign did not use a professional fundraiser as a point of pride.

Invest in a project manager (owner's representative) who represents the museum's interests.

Working with the general contractor, the architect and the MMCM executive committee, the final building budget was approximately 50% of the original. Working with the fabricators, that budget was further reduced by about one-third without losing significant exhibits in the interior space. The reduced budget demonstrated to donors an improved expectation of the project's timely completion.

Location, Location, Location!

Even though the city of Saginaw was not perceived as the best location due to familiar urban characteristics of crime and vacant structures, museum staff and volunteers made a successful case for this location with potential donors. Easy access to the major expressway and the proximity of compatible schools and arts institutions helped build support. Significant neighborhood improvements have occurred since the museum opened in June 2008.