

Children's Museum Dedicates "Play It Again Theater"

■ Spirit Mountain Community Fund is principle sponsor.



Photos by Ron Karten

With the curtains closed on the new stage, Museum Executive Director Sarah Orleans, left, says thanks with a "Thanks for being a Star" star to Spirit Mountain Community Fund Director Shelley Hanson and Program Officer Louis King.

By Ron Karten

For all the kids out there that are afraid of the dark, there's a new venue in town at the Portland Children's Museum. The venue, called the Dorothea Lensch Play It Again Theater, is "the stage that never goes dark."

Thanks to a \$50,000 lead grant from the Spirit Mountain Community Fund (SMCF), and additional support from the PGE Foundation and the Juan Young Trust, kids have the run of the new theater when organized events are over, and it comes with professional lighting from Rose City Light and Sound, more costumes than Halloween, a puppet stage and a raised platform called a Juliet stage, that may be the only one in a kids' theater anywhere.

So says Sarah Orleans, Executive Director of this children's wonderland now celebrating its fifth year at the Portland Zoo complex. Over the last 18 months, the museum has built six new exhibits, a new oval classroom and two national traveling exhibits

— one featuring Sesame Street characters and a second, the result of winning a national competition, showing how Japanese children live.

The theater provides for an audience of more than 100 for shows, professional and childlike, on a semi-circle of carpeted risers in front of the stage. Outside, a marquee-type sign makes the announcement of each show possible. Lights and sound effects are as available to kids as to professionals. Ditto costumes.

The museum had 250,000 visitors last year, and in the summer of 2005, the museum welcomed its one millionth visitor to the current space. According to the Portland Business Journal, the museum is the state's 11th largest attraction.

Besides fund raising, "new ideas" are Orleans' main preoccupation, "and keeping people excited about the new ideas."

This idea, however, was not such a hard sell at the Spirit Mountain

Community Fund. "This new theater offers the chance for lively, theatrical play, and research has proven time and time again the value of play in brain development," said Tribal member Shelley Hanson, Director of SMCF. "Spirit Mountain is proud to support another program that brightens the futures of Oregon's children."

This is the third grant the Community Fund has provided to the Children's Museum since 2001 for a total of \$112,000.

The theater was dedicated to Dorothea Lensch, former director of the Portland Bureau of Parks & Recreation, who was instrumental in starting the museum all the way back in 1949. It is the nation's seventh oldest.

The theatre, almost twice as large as the museum's existing Imagination Theater, has been available to kids since December, but juggler and comedian Rhys Thomas (www.jugglemania.com) made it all official

on Friday evening, January 5, giving the opening proclamation a humorous reading before launching into a 20-minute juggling routine.

In one bit, Thomas used three rubber balls, two red, one yellow, to represent a waterfall, stalactites and stalagmites in a cave, numerous mythological figures, and countless other witty visuals, all while keeping the balls in the air.

A very young but very accomplished marimba band as well as characters on stilts and balloon bending clowns welcomed visitors to the opening night festivities. The food, appropriately, included tiny little hamburgers and cheeseburgers along with macaroni and cheese.

"Oregon is blessed to have it in our neighborhood," said Hanson, "offering programs and services for toddlers through older youngsters."

And from the look of things on this recent Friday evening, these programs get the toes twinkling on a lot of adults, too. ■



Juggler Rhys Thomas works his magic, left, charming children in the audience, above.