



Ben Lonergan/EO Media Group

Ricardo Lara, 7, pieces together large blue blocks while playing this summer at the Children's Museum of Eastern Oregon in Pendleton. After a 444-day closure because of the global pandemic, the museum reopened in June and recently celebrated its 25-year anniversary.

By Tammy Malgesini

Go! Magazine

PENDLETON — For more than 25 years, children and families throughout Eastern Oregon and beyond have engaged in educational exploration through interactive exhibits and play space at the Children's Museum of Eastern Oregon.

Executive Director Joanna Engle was thrilled to re-open the museum's doors June 1 after a 444-day closure because of

the global pandemic. Less than three months later, a block party celebration marked the organization's 25-year anniversary.

A trip to the museum wouldn't be complete, Engle said, without a visit to the Pizza Cafe. While puzzled why it's such a popular attraction, she said kids gravitate toward it and the Grocery Experience. Both replicate a trip to a pizzeria or grocery store — complete with a food preparation area and check-out stand.

"There's something about it that they just love," Engle said. "I think it's the experience of acting the part of the grown-up and they get to be in charge."

In addition, there's a big ship. Engle said visitors are often taken aback by the large structure housed within the museum's walls.

"And even though it's supposed to represent Lewis and Clark, it very quickly turns into a pirate ship," she said with a laugh. "Kids can crawl all over it."

Children's Museum offers space to learn and play

Other highlights include the Big Blue Block Room. Featuring a set of Imagination Playground blocks, it offers "loose parts," giving children of all ages a chance to play freely. Adults, Engle said, will spend hours "helping" their children build a structure.

Debbie McBee, who was the driving force behind the creation of the children's museum, longed for a place for her young children to play during the harsh winters of Eastern Oregon. After organizing a public meeting to gauge interest, nearly 200 people rolled up their sleeves with exhibit planning, fundraising efforts, recruiting volunteers and more.

Board President Kim Chavez-Sierra and at-large board member Chris Garrigues were ecstatic when the museum reopened. In addition to the play space for children, Garrigues said it offers parents a chance to hang out.

"For any small town to have a place like this is really incredible," he said. "It's such an amazing place."

In addition to local families, Engle sees travelers stopping in as well as a lot of children coming in with their grandparents. The museum offers a great rest stop. Also, she said, it provides natural interaction opportunities.

"There are things grandparents can explain to their grandkids — they're playing together and they interact in a really neat way," Engle said.

This is all music to McBee's ears.

"A child's work is play, and this wonderful nonprofit has been able to provide children and families a fun place to learn and play together for many years," she said.

The Children's Museum of Eastern Oregon is located at 400 S. Main St. in Pendleton. It's open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. (closed 1-2 p.m. for cleaning). Daily admission is \$7 per person. For more information, visit www.cmeo.org, Facebook or Instagram.

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