OUR STORIES
a field journal

2013-2014
ANNUAL REPORT
Portland Children’s Museum

...is the only children’s museum in the nation that also includes a school and research center. The Museum, Opal School, and the Museum Center for Learning inform each other in dynamic dialogue between informal, formal, and professional education. Opal School offers rich learning experiences and environments resulting from the practice of inquiry-based approaches through the arts and sciences. The Center studies how children learn in these environments, and helps to apply those approaches to exhibits and programs in the Museum. The result is an integrated, philosophically aligned approach based on playful inquiry—where adults and children learn together both in and out of school, and best practices are shared with educators worldwide through publications, workshops, and symposiums.

Our integrated approach reached its most recent expression with the opening of Outdoor Adventure in April 2014. For years, Opal School had used the adjacent Hoyt Arboretum as an outdoor classroom. The Center had studied how children interact with and learn in nature. That research was applied to transform 1.3 acres of inaccessible land adjacent to the Museum into an area that is neither park nor playground, but rather a carefully designed nature learning environment for families with children of all ages and abilities.
We collaborate to create transformative learning experiences through the arts and sciences.
“Write it down,” my mother would say if I wanted to remember something. Write it down. Draw a picture. Take a photo. Make a list.

Don’t forget.

Portland Children’s Museum hasn’t published an annual report in more than five years. Everyone felt that 2013-14 is a year we want to remember, with stories we just had to share. As an organization, we’ve been learning to become better storytellers, from the students in our Opal classrooms to the members around our board table.

One place we tell stories is during Rally. At 8:45 each morning, everyone working on the floor that day—and as many other staff members who can—gather at the front admissions desk. After we go around the circle for announcements, we ask for a story from the day before: about a child who had fun, a kind visitor compliment, a staff member who went above and beyond. The person with the best story gets to adjourn the group with a clap and the shout of “Break!” We’re sent off into the day armed with a story, reminded of the children and families at the heart of our work.

In the past year, we enjoyed 313,059 visitors in the Museum, learned alongside 125 students in Opal School, and hosted 200 educators (a record) in our Museum Center for Learning’s Symposium. That’s a lot of stories! We selected six favorites, and—yes, Mom—we wrote them down.

We hope you’ll be inspired, too.

Ruth G. Shelly
Executive Director
313,059
Portland Children’s Museum visitors

4
months of record attendance
On Earth Day, the Museum opened a new 1.3-acre nature play space, Outdoor Adventure.

It just so happens that a woman and her son live in an apartment, and they don’t have a backyard. One day, they decide to get outside anyway. They go to Outdoor Adventure.

He sees children catching water in buckets when it surges out of the ground and carrying it to the sand pit. One pours the water and the other stirs the sand to build their mound higher. He asks, “Can I play too?” They dig in the sand and splash in the water. No one tells them how to do it because when children plan and follow through—when they don’t give up—they develop the parts of their brains that give them the tools to handle things as an adult.

He zigs and he zags down the steep switchbacks, and he risks climbing Zoom Tree all by himself to test his balance and strength against the ground and the tree. He learns where his body is in relation to the world around him—preparing his mind to do math, to read a map, and to understand an architectural plan.

Climbing down, he tells himself a story about the magical creatures who need shelter from the sun and the rain. He builds them a fort, getting his knees in the dirt to prop each limb over limb. He puts canvas over it all and crawls in to live awhile with his stories.

His mom calls out to call him home. Like so many moms before her.

Now our backyard is their backyard.
When you approach Opal Art Fence you’ll want to take a look around. Take in the view, certainly, but we also recommend that you squat and turn to see the fairy door just at the bottom of the tree shading the fence. The Opal students were the first ones to notice that door, and it was part of the inspiration to find a new perspective on the stories that live in Outdoor Adventure.

Our Exhibits team invited Opal students to collaborate with them to make a necessary barrier into a wonder-filled structure for Outdoor Adventure. Everyone began by thinking about what collaboration means. One student said, “It means connecting your ideas.” Another said, “Brains together, hearts together.” Then the work began to realize what those things mean. One student sums up the process:

“It was really hard because everyone kept saying no, then we did majority rules. That didn’t work because people were upset that they got voted out. Then we tried rock, paper, scissors. But then we just heard everyone and snapped our ideas together.”

They drew stories for us to read of flying dragons, an upside-down town that you can find underneath Outdoor Adventure, and a wise owl.

They showed that birds lived in Outdoor Adventure too, and helped the Museum get certified as a Gold Backyard Habitat by the Audubon Society. They helped James make the new homes high in the trees for bats and birds. One’s for that owl who perches in the fence. He keeps watch over the fairies who live next door.
Patrick Dougherty leads Portlanders in weaving together natural materials to create a major art piece.

When the Museum commissioned Patrick Dougherty to create an inaugural art installation in May, he shaped a series of structures from local willow and vine maple, dubbing it Big Mister Twister. But he didn’t do it alone. For 20 days, more than 50 volunteers wove together saplings and vines during two four-hour shifts per day. From their hands the artwork emerged.

One of the volunteers, Christine Bellows, doesn’t have a child and doesn’t work with children, so she’d never been to the Museum before. She came because she’s an artist, and she knew Dougherty’s work.

Over the weeks, she helped weave branches to form walls and archways. It put her in touch with her younger self: “I used to spend hours of my day playing in the forest and climbing trees. Helping to build Big Mister Twister was such a great way to be reminded of just how simple life can be because all we were doing was playing with tree branches.” Now her work inspires more imaginative play in Outdoor Adventure. The fanciful structure makes children wonder. If you listen, you can hear them talk about whether witches or elves live there before they run through the tilted doorways screaming with glee.

Our community-crafted art piece will serve as a play habitat for years to come. Now Museum visitors have the opportunity for a daily encounter with art as an intrinsic part of Outdoor Adventure. Plus, we’ve made some artist friends along the way. We look forward to seeing them around when our new Artists in Residence come to play too. (Thanks to the generosity of Arlene Schnitzer and The Collins Foundation, we have nine artists coming in the next three years!)
Educators from around the world discover the connections between nature and early learning.

Being so near Hoyt Arboretum is ideal. Over the years it has become an essential setting for Opal’s curriculum of interdependence. Our reliance on each other and on nature inspired the Museum Center for Learning’s 2014 Symposium, “Nurturing Our Relationship to the Natural World.”

At this Symposium we reflected on the role of our environment in Reggio-inspired learning. Each place and practice is unique, but at Symposium we can draw inspiration from each other. We learn about the process of collaboration by doing it. We nurture community right where we find ourselves.

Sara Schulein Perets—founder of The Sunshine Shack—was in a concrete jungle in Los Angeles, in a building previously occupied by Hollywood Bail Bonds. Her preschool already had a story of transformation. But Sara was looking for a deeper change, and she shared her journey with us at Symposium 2014. During her first visit to Opal for a small workshop, she became inspired by what she saw as a “cultivation of humanity.” Opal became her model. When she got home, she put on her “busy hat” and got to work.

Her first step was to ask herself questions that didn’t have answers, like “Who am I? Who is my community? Who are we together?” She started having authentic dialogue with parents, teachers, and most importantly students. She strived to make everyone visible. In the process, her world transformed. With no nature in sight not only did children blossom, but parents did too. Everyone is more comfortable dwelling with the growing pains of change.

She discovered a whole community had put on their “busy hats” with her.
A SPIN ON BIKES

Cycle City: A Spin on Bikes was designed and built in-house to reflect our Portland community.

Opal students begin by picking up the PVC pipe and fittings. They work together to reconstruct the whole idea of a bicycle, and they inspired our first purposefully Portland-centric exhibit, Cycle City.

One child and then another builds wheels with the PVC pipe, carefully choosing elbow joints to turn the straight lines into curved lines. But the wheels don’t act like wheels. They don’t spin. And that simply won’t do when you’re getting at the heart of a bicycle.

With wooden wheels in the next session, they moved further faster. When one child constructs a bicycle frame, the others build on the idea. As quickly as one child adds something, another removes it. Together they reveal how a bicycle in constant transformation still remains a bicycle. One says, “I have an idea! We don’t need the pedals. We can use our feet!” As the pieces fit or don’t, they reveal what is essential and what is extraneous.

Opal students’ playful inquiry inspired the many ways the bicycle was reimagined for the exhibit. As bikeportland.org put it, “Cycle City succeeds by presenting the bicycle as something far beyond its trite cultural perceptions as an eco-conscious vehicle or a tool used solely by ‘cyclists.’ Instead, visitors get a taste of the bicycle’s creative, social, industrial, scientific, and cultural possibilities.” Whether it’s art or engineering, collaboration takes center stage.

We find out that what is most essential is working together.
If you are a refugee, your family history varies. I am seeking shelter from disaster. We are fleeing war. They are looking for asylum. I hurt. We hope. They live.

If you are a refugee served by the Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization, the Museum brings the clay to you. You come from one of eight different countries and you speak at least one of ten different languages. In the beginning, you wonder and you mold. By the end, you share the language of play.


They all make sculptures out of clay. They make art together. They make art apart. They share.

First, they share the clay. Then, they share techniques. Finally, they share stories. The Uncle makes an elephant from memory. The Grandmother adds a man riding the elephant from memory. And the Cousin makes a snowman from memory. They gather all of the memories together on one tile and tell a tale that makes the Child laugh. The Child learns from her family, and the clay helps.

If you are a refugee, you go to Portland Children’s Museum. Your name is Muhammed Alabadi. Your daughter dances. Your daughter plays. You say, “My daughter enjoyed this night so much she did not want to go home.” The joy inspires her to learn, since when she is surprised, new pathways emerge in her mind.

Just so, new avenues open through play.
7,979 memberships

14 percent of these were Family Access memberships
“I remember the day we opened Outdoor Adventure as one of great achievement, and I was in awe of what we built. It was seven years ago when we embarked on transforming Portland Children’s Museum with a new nature play space, and the opening was finally here. It was a time for us to celebrate with the many donors who made it all possible, and the bubbly was symbolic of great things to come!”

Shawn DuBurg
Portland Children’s Museum Board Chair, 2011-2014
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A full 2013-14 audit is available at portlandcm.org/audit

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