

**“WE FELT THAT WE COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN HELPING
CHILDREN LEARN HOW THE WORLD WORKS BEYOND OUR WALLS.”**

— Marilee Jennings



Marilee Jennings, Executive Director

CHILDREN'S *Discovery Museum*

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THE SAME WONDER AND ADVENTURE—BUT NOW IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS.

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The Children's Discovery Museum is a child's paradise. It is a busy sanctuary of adventure and experimentation, fun and excitement. There is something for every child, every interest, every background and learning style. Children can hunker down in the artist's loft and create or dig for fossils in the shadow of the Columbian mammoth whose skeleton was found along the nearby Guadalupe River. They can fly planes, drive fire trucks, ride in a Wells Fargo stagecoach, dance up musical stairs, cook and serve meals in the play kitchen, build bridges, shoot balls across the room with a jet of water, and blow bubbles the size of a pumpkin.

In all of this laughter, concentration, and activity, the children are learning. Every exhibit and area in the museum has been carefully designed and curated to enhance the learning process. While at play, participants' brains are absorbing valuable lifelong lessons about being active, eating healthily, being good stewards of the planet, about cultures around the world, and even about themselves.

Marilee Jennings, executive director of the Children's Discovery Museum, explains, "What I care about most is making sure that the needs of all children in our community are met. We are remarkably diverse, and we want to ensure that we are welcoming and provide access to all."

"We are very aware of our demographics," Marilee continues. "We want to be a reflection of our community. We ask ourselves, 'Who are the people you are seeing and are they being represented?'" In the almost 30 years since the museum's inception,

it has taken the idea of cultural competency very seriously. "We want to be welcoming, responsive, and respectful," she says.

Being a reflection of the community, however, has not meant that this Children's Museum is a Silicon Valley museum with focus on and bias toward technology. "Here in Silicon Valley, there is pressure to be so tech oriented," she sighs. Within the museum leadership, there is a constant dialogue about how many screens are needed and a lively discussion of how technology can be a means to an end. The hope is to balance the benefits of innovation and technology with good, old-fashioned play. "We're huge fans of technology," Marilee says with a smile, "for what it enables."

But as the museum leadership looked towards its next big project, it was aware of the risks of children's increased screen time and sedentary, indoor, tech-focused lifestyles. To tackle this challenge, it has embarked on a major expansion—outdoors.

Bill's Backyard (named in honor of generous, longtime benefactor and board member, Bill Sullivan) is a revolutionary play space taking up a full half acre along the backside of the museum, facing the green space along the Guadalupe River. "We wanted to create an unstructured place for children to explore, engage in physical activity, and experience natural materials," Marilee explains. The museum believes that this type of interaction with the physical, natural world hugely impacts critical thinking and creativity. "A lot of parents are scared to let their kids play outside," Marilee says, leaning forward, "and I get that. I completely understand



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Marilee and her team dream of creating a "bridge to nature," an outdoor space as engaging and inspiring as their indoor exhibits. "We want the parents to be comfortable letting their children play and explore." To create this outdoor wonderland, the museum partnered with MIG, a Berkeley-based company famed for its innovative open-air learning spaces, and created a plan that blends imagination, nature, and education.

Bill's Backyard is beautiful and neat but not overly structured or overwhelming. The Junior Ranger Station offers a welcoming orientation and allows children to touch animal skeletons and pelts. There are maps, not just of Bill's Backyard, but of open spaces throughout Santa Clara County, in hopes that families will be inspired to make the leap from this backyard to the many parks and green spaces around the Bay Area.

Next is an entire area dedicated to the art of

fort building—using reeds and grasses, branches and rocks, children can construct the fort of their dreams. A spot that Marilee is particularly excited about is the dig pit. She explains that they had a prototype last summer and realized, due to its extreme popularity, they would have to alter their plans and double its size. The enormous pit, full of rocks and gravel, is exemplary of the type of "safe risk" that is part of the Bill's Backyard philosophy. "Now you might expect people to say, 'Oh, what if a child swallows a rock!' But you know what? That whole time we ran the prototype, no one swallowed a rock. Now I'm sure some kids put rocks in their mouths, but parents weren't worried. And I think it's because it was outside—somehow that makes these small safe risks worth taking." And since all children love rocks, there is a dry creek bed running the length of the space. "When Mother Nature provides water, it will be there," says Marilee, explaining that drought awareness and valuing water as a precious resource is another tenet of the Bill's Backyard philosophy.



Near the entrance, three tall trees connected with ropes and “sky bridges” will allow children to climb up high and discover their world below. They’ll be able to see the lookout tower and tunnel just next to the trees, where kids can run, jump, and tumble down the grassy hill.

The far side of the backyard is an outdoor classroom with a solar roof and a space for rotating exhibits. One exhibit, for example, will allow kids to pump rainwater out of the cistern into small watering cans and water the elaborate vegetable and herb keyhole garden. (The garden was specifically designed so that one can get around all sides of the planters, even in a wheelchair.)

Visually, the crown jewel of the entire backyard is the Tree of 40 Fruit, which will be planted in the center of the keyhole garden. For the past two years, environmental artist and professor Sam Van Aken has been carefully grafting limbs of myriad stone fruit onto a juvenile plum tree. He has sought out farmers from around the area and sourced heritage and antique varieties (meaning they are over two

hundred years old). All of the stone fruit chosen will bloom in shades of purple, pink, or white, creating a spectacular prism of color every spring. “This particular piece is an emblem of the intersection of art and environment,” Marilee explains, but it’s also a nod to the Santa Clara Valley, the Valley of Heart’s Delight, that was once home to thousands of orchards.

Much like the giant mural near the bubbles exhibit that highlights San Jose’s history and legacy, Bill’s Backyard has been designed around a strong sense of place and love for this particular corner of California. Bill’s Backyard will give children a safe, inspiring area in which to explore their surroundings, learn to conserve water, test their courage, and give in to the abandon that comes from rolling down a steep hill.

Bill’s Backyard will become the city’s backyard. Its thoughtful philosophy and intentional design will give Silicon Valley children a childhood full of joyful memories of adventure and instill in them a love of nature and this very special place.

