



OUR STORY

The story of Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose cannot be told without acknowledging the legacy of creative visionaries who dared to imagine a place that children could truly call their own. A place where children were empowered to make decisions, be in charge, and find joy in unstructured play was a radical idea in the late 1800s. But like many great ideas forged by courageous dreamers and entrepreneurs, they found a way. The country's first children's museum was founded in 1899 by educators in Brooklyn, New York. Fourteen years later, the Boston's Children Museum was founded. Since then, more than 400 hands-on youth museums have been established in cities and towns around the world.

In 1982, two Santa Clara County moms, Reba Wehrly and Carolyn Nelson, thought the South Bay should join the enlightened ranks of these cities and towns. After a commissioned "public opinion poll" demonstrated widespread support, the two contacted the Los Angeles and Denver Children's Museums for guidance. Buoyed by enthusiastic support and a big dream, they were off and running. Soon after, a board of directors was formed and planning began in earnest. In 1983, Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose was incorporated as a 501(c) tax-exempt organization.

Sally Osberg was hired as the project director in charge of strategy and fundraising. The next step was to find the right location. In 1983, the City of San Jose Redevelopment Agency authorized funding to acquire property within the Guadalupe River Park in downtown San Jose. World renowned Mexico City-based Ricardo Legorreta Arquitecto was retained by the City of San Jose to design the museum, and later the Guadalupe River Park, and the Tech Museum of Innovation. Osberg would later become the first executive director, leading the organization from concept to completion and helping shape the museum into one of world's most respected and dynamic youth museums during her 19-year tenure.

The first good fundraising news came in 1984 with the lead gift of \$800,000 by Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Computer, with an additional gift of \$1 million dollars from him two years later.

Recognizing the importance of showing people first-hand what a children's museum could mean to all families and educators, the museum launched a comprehensive *Museum on the Road* program of traveling exhibits and programs. The program served more than 50,000 children prior to the museum's opening. Seeds were being planted.

In 1988, Mayor Tom McEnery and Redevelopment Agency Executive Director Frank Taylor shoveled the first dirt at the groundbreaking of the 42,000 square foot facility, with a 5,000 square foot wing for Opera San Jose, later gifted to the museum for additional exhibit space. That same year, exhibit development and fabrication work by staff began. This was the beginning of a deep commitment to in-house development, the foundation of the museum's award-winning exhibit program.

By 1989, the community had spoken loud and clear. The museum staff and board had raised nearly \$10 million dollars in the Capital Campaign. On the sunny weekend of June 2 & 3, 1990, the museum celebrated its public opening. With a projected annual attendance of 155,000, the museum served more than 340,000 in the first full year of operations. The seeds were not only sprouting, they had blossomed.

Under the leadership of Marilee Jennings, the museum currently serves more than 400,000 children, families and educators each year with changing exhibits, a full calendar of programs and events, community service youth programs, and cultural competency, environmental stewardship, and research initiatives. Ms. Jennings has served as the executive director since 2008. She joined the museum in 1987 where she led fundraising and marketing efforts until she was promoted to Associate Director in 2003, when she assumed executive-level management and operational responsibilities.

In honor of the museum's 25th anniversary, Ms. Jennings launched the campaign to burst through the purple walls and create an innovative outdoor learning environment. *Bill's Backyard: Bridge to Nature* opened in October 2017, nearly doubling the museum exhibit space and connecting visitors to nature and the Guadalupe River running through the site. Ten exhibit features on one half-acre bring science and environmental education and imaginations to life for children, families, and educators.

Ms. Jennings continues to lead the expansion of the museum's inclusion and cultural competence programs and plays a key role in impacting the greater museum field. The museum first launched *Breaking Ground* in 2013 and then *Common Ground*, two initiatives funded by prestigious grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences to work with immigrant populations. In 2012, the museum, in partnership with the Association of Children's Museums, Association of Science-Technology Centers, and the Garibay Group, co-founded the *Cultural Competence Learning Institute (CCLI)*.

This national program partners with museum leaders to change organizational practices to be more responsive and relevant around diversity and inclusion efforts. The program recognizes the business imperative in transforming traditional museums into multicultural leaders. In 2017, *CCLI* received a highly competitive and distinguished \$500,000 National Leadership grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to further develop and expand the program's impact. More than 35 museums across the United States have participated in the year-long program to-date.

In 2020, the *CCLI* team partnered with the Exploratorium to launch *Cambio*, a professional development project that helps organizations shift their practices to create STEM experiences that are culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining to Latinx communities. The three-year collaboration is funded by a \$2.8 million dollar grant from the National Science Foundation.

That same year, the museum was recognized nationally for this work with the American Alliance of Museums' *2020 Institutional Award for Diversity, Equity, Accessibility & Inclusion*.

Ms. Jennings has embarked on a capital campaign to deepen the museum's commitment to environmental education. Scheduled to open in the summer of 2024, *Exploration Portal*, is a 4,000 square foot nature-themed, educational play space adjacent to *Bill's Backyard*.

The museum is in the middle of a three-year planning process to develop a cultural celebration and exhibition around the Persian New Year, *Nowruz*. A pilot celebration was held in March 2023 and the exhibition opening is planned for 2025.

In the summer of 2023, the Museum celebrated serving its 10 millionth visitor.

"Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children."

- *Sitting Bull*