

# DREAM BUILDERS

A confederacy of

Explore More Discovery Museum volunteers, who help thousands of area children learn through play activities, include (above, l-r) Jessica Strawn, Gail Grusler, Adrienna Rinella and Cathy Biller.



Giving back to the area's children BY MARTHA BELL GRAHAM

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volunteer at the Explore More Discovery Museum corrals children asking, "Who wants to make snow?" Together, the group measures, pours and stirs. Voila! Cold, feathery snow. The children are enthralled. "Can you eat it?" one asks. "Is it cold?" "Yes, feel it," the volunteer says. She lifts the bowl in the child's direction. Elsewhere on a stage replete with curtains, costumes and a row of padded seats for an audience, two young girls ply their theatrical skills while a boy in a sound booth produces sound effects ranging from howling winds to waves crashing. Somewhere in between, two boys make their way up the loft of the big red barn. Nearby, two siblings build a gigantic structure and then delight in knocking it down. ¶ It feels like chaos. It sounds like a playground. But it's the purest kind of learning children can do. And it goes on daily at Explore More Discovery Museum, a place that provides an innovative learning space for thousands of children throughout the Shenandoah Valley.



**Lisa Shull ('85, '91M) has coordinated a confederacy of dream builders to create the Explore More Discovery Museum in downtown Harrisonburg. JMU connections – College of Education professors and students, volunteers, student teachers and parents – have deep roots in the children's museum. And, yes, the museum features a two-story constructed tree inside the learning space.**

“Children learn by doing, and play is essential to healthy development. A children’s museum is the perfect environment,” says Lisa Shull (’85, ’91M), the museum’s executive director and a driving force behind its institution. “It’s a place where children can follow their own interests, set their own pace, interact positively with parents and caregivers and discover new opportunities and talents. They get the chance to try things out without the risk of failure. Every child succeeds.”

Shull, formerly an elementary school teacher and supervisor of student teachers for JMU’s College of Education, and her husband, Brian, economic development director for Harrisonburg, discovered children’s museums with their own two children.

Then, they wondered about Harrisonburg. “My husband and I decided that we were going to gauge interest in starting a children’s museum. It just wouldn’t go away. The passion was so strong,” says Shull. “We invited people we knew with varied interests and skill sets.”

Together they formed a confederacy of dream builders.

Out of an initial meeting in January 2002 at Massanutten Regional Library, the Explore More Discovery Museum was

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born. “When we started reaching out to others, it started to snowball,” Shull says. “In a whirlwind fashion, we started drafting a mission statement, completing nonprofit paperwork, and developing an official name and logo.”

Three months later, the museum began as a traveling show. “Our first week, we hosted an exhibit called *Sheep to Sweater* at the library,” Shull says. “Kids could spin and dye wool and there was even a sheep shearing demonstration. I recall our uncertainty on opening day. We had no idea how many participants might show. Much to our delight, there was a line winding down the street before the doors were open,” she remembers.

During seven weeks of that first summer, thousands of children participated in a series of traveling museum opportunities appropriately named *Where in the world is the Harrisonburg Children’s Museum?* “We traveled from location to location,” Shull says, “showcasing the many aspects a museum would incorporate, including the performing arts, science, communication, and health and wellness. At the end of the summer, we were overwhelmed with requests asking us to consider opening year round.”

So, they found a building. Once again volunteers sprang into action. As Shull looks back, she is amazed at how much work volunteers did and how timely their help was. Shortly before opening the downtown museum (first known as the Harrisonburg Children’s Museum), she recalls, the bathrooms desperately needed cleaning. “A man came in off the street. ‘I’m a professional cleaner,’ he said.” The man, whom Shull had never seen before, got right to work. “I’ve never seen anything sparkle so.”

On Oct. 15, 2003, the museum opened on Court Square. Seven years later, the Explore More Discovery Museum hosts more than 35,000 annual visitors, including curriculum-driven field trips in conjunction with area schools.

At the beginning no one — not even the Shulls — knew if the dream would grow wings or how much work it would entail. “I *did* know that it would be essential to pull others with varied talents together to make it happen and that our museum should be a reflection of our community,” Shull says.

Fortunately, the Shulls were surrounded by a cadre of volunteers quickly committed to the vision for a museum designed just for children. Among those volunteers were Tammy (’94) and Ted Brown (’93). Tammy served as volunteer coordinator for the museum until stepping down this year to open a new downtown restaurant called Pennybackers. Brown is unequivocal in her praise for the museum’s volunteers. “Without them we couldn’t operate.”

Shull agrees, adding that volunteer support from JMU has been critical to the museum’s success. In fact, the list of JMU supporters is long. In addition to hundreds of students who volunteer, support comes from all quarters of the university including President Emeritus Ronald E. Carrier and Edith J. Carrier, who serve as honorary

(Clockwise from left):  
Lisa Shull (’85, ’91M) leads museum goers through a Farmers Market, while future teacher and JMU sophomore Gail Grusler (’12) helps a friend have some fun with JMU head gear.





chairs of the museum’s current capital campaign; Harrisonburg Mayor Kai Degner (’03, ’05M); board of visitors member Judy Strickler (’60); Glenda (former JMU staffer) and Pat Rooney, former Marching Royal Dukes director; JMU professor Martha Ross; and dozens of local alumni like Laura Conklin (’86,

’93M), Paula Polglase (’92, ’96M) and Scott Rogers (’02, ’00M).

Every academic year, JMU’s Community Service-Learning Center contacts the museum to organize volunteers, Brown says. Circle K, a JMU service organization, is another significant source of student volunteers, as are academic departments.

“I volunteer because I want to get involved in the community,” says Jessica Strawn (’12). “I missed working with kids. The museum offers a great outlet for this experience.” The history major from Roanoke hopes to work in a museum. “I have learned a lot about educational tools and techniques from my work here.”

Sophomore Gail Grusler (’12) earned valuable academic enrichment. “The museum has definitely given me more experience working with children. It has further enforced my desire to be a teacher.” Grusler, from Cinnaminson, N.J., is studying exceptional education in the Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies program.

The museum’s impact on children is not its only positive impact. Consistently cited as one of the most positive draws to downtown, the Explore More Discovery Museum is part of Harrisonburg’s successful downtown revitalization. Volunteers are often asked to share the story of their grassroots efforts with other organizations. Area businesses, including realtors, regularly arrange visits to the museum for families of prospective employees and potential retirees.

“The children’s museum has served as a key attraction to downtown,” says Eddie Bumbaugh (’73), director of Harrisonburg’s Downtown Renaissance. “Increasingly local citizens and

visitors are discovering that downtown offers outstanding attractions such as this museum, plus awesome restaurants and specialty retail shops.”

Last year Shull embarked on another adventure almost as daunting as creating the museum. In November, the museum moved into a renovated Main Street building through a lease/purchase agreement in partnership with the city. Phase one of a three-phase renovation to transform the building into a Mecca for children is complete.

Of course, accomplishing the renovation all at once would be nice, Shull says, but phasing makes sense. The new 36,000-square-foot location will increase the usable space six-fold when all phases are complete. Phase one doubled the museum’s space and, for the first time, provided sufficient storage and administrative areas, as well as generous space for innovative displays.

The new museum contains a two-story Discovery Tree complete with seasonal lighting and a tree house facade to capture the imagination of visitors young and old. While the new museum reprises some of its most popular attractions, it has added a science lab, television studio, super service center, early childhood area and a full-sized ambulance to anchor the health exhibit. It features party rooms, an expanded Creation Station, a new facade and signage for the building’s exterior that will further enhance the community’s impact and involvement.

It’s a big dream, but Shull has learned: “Dream big and follow your vision. Don’t let every detail sideline your ability to move forward. Surround yourself with great people and encourage them to add their gifts to make the project the best it can be.”

“Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm,” reads a plaque over Shull’s desk. Undoubtedly, she would add: “and enthusiastic volunteers.”

**Harrisonburg Mayor Kai Degner (’03, ’05M) shows off the Explore More Discovery Museum’s new sign with Lisa Shull (’85) at the November opening in the museum’s new space. Future voters, museum board members and JMU volunteers shared in the moment. (Left): JMU volunteer Pat Buennemeyer.**

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