Please Touch Museum opens new creative arts studio for kids to create their own works of art

By Lauren McCutcheon
FOR THE INQUIRER

When the Please Touch Museum officially opens its Creative Arts Studio (lower level, across from the train room) on Saturday at 9 a.m., the move will be both strategically forward and symbolically backward, said the museum’s directors.

Forward, because the 1,200-square-foot space aligns with the once-struggling organization’s strategic plan to involve whole families, older kids included, in its programming, while fostering development through creative play.

Back, because in 1877, Please Touch’s home, Memorial Hall, was the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art, predecessor to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Said Polly McKenna-Cress, the museum’s head of engagement, “Creativity is built into the legacy of this space.”

A pastel rainbow sign announces the already kid-tested 75-person-capacity space. Activity within is visible through large, semi-circular arched windows. Inside, pale wood shelving, tables, and short stools — all modular so the space can transform as needed — along with bright white walls and colorful storage bins impart an IKEA feel — except with clay, yarn, tiles, rubbings, books, toys, and, for the season, harvest gold, red, and orange construction paper.

When it opens, a ROYGBIV mosaic of magnetic mini tiles will fill a large wipe board. Studio manager Danielle Defassio created the assembly. Kids colored the tiles.

Enter the space, witness children and grown-ups quietly making things there, and it’s easy to wonder: Why didn’t the Please Touch have a space like this before?

“Exploring creativity and the arts is a very important part of a children’s development. It fosters math skills, critical thinking skills and language and literacy skills,” said museum CEO Trish Wellenbach. “Creative and performing arts really is the first way children start to express themselves, the first form of communication.”

The difference between this space, and the construction zone, children’s hospital, mini Shop-Rite, water tables or other permanent exhibits, is that visitors older than the museum’s traditional birth-to-age-7 demographic are purposely involved, even essential, there.

Parents offer extra hands for sculpting. Big siblings lead the way in friendship bracelet-making. Grandparents gloat when their little ones hold up crayon creations.

“We’re really looking at the whole family as opposed to the children only. It’s not the parents standing back — it’s encouraging the parents and older brothers and sisters to work together,” said McKenna-Cress.

Programming in the studio — clay one day, stop motion animation another — changes daily. Projects change monthly, often coordinating with current temporary exhibits. The theme now: mural arts for October, Mural Arts Month, and STEM learning, an objective of the exhibit upstairs, “Thomas & Friends: Explore the Rails.”

Come February, two artists-in-residence affiliated with the six-month-long “America to Zanzibar” exhibit focusing on local and international Muslim cultures will run regular workshops in the space.

There’s also a plan to bring art projects out into the wide hallway outside the studio.

Visitors pay no additional fee to enter the studio and no fee to take home projects. They’ll also have the option to leave their work for display. Said Wellenbach, “We want our kids to say, ‘My work is hanging in a museum — the Please Touch Museum.’”

CREATE THIS

Creative Arts Studio
• 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday,
11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday & Sunday,
Please Touch Museum, 4231 Avenue of the Republic, 215-581-3181, pleasetouchmuseum.org

PHOTOGRAPH BY: MICHAEL BRYANT

The new Creative Arts Studio space in the Please Touch Museum that opens the weekend of October 27, 2018.

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