Genderless mascot empowers kids to explore their own curiosity

By Patricia D. Wellenbach
FOR THE INQUIRER

Children at the Please Touch Museum ask myriad questions every day. We believe it is key to how children learn.

The question of the past week is one we knew was coming: Is Squiggles a boy or a girl?

As a leading 21st-century children’s museum, Please Touch has made bold moves in the last few years, including a refresh of our brand. The new brand and logo reflect the children who experience all the museum has to offer. The logo’s large eyes speak to a child’s curious nature, looking deep for understanding and knowledge; the openness of the character’s body and its wild hair represent a child’s tremendous capacity to welcome new things. Visitors young and old loved it. We knew what had to come next: The museum needed a mascot.

A team of museum staff spent months in creative concept and design meetings. Our commitment to mirror our community, to be welcoming, diverse, and inclusive, motivated us to make an important decision: Our mascot would not identify with any gender. Children come to the museum to explore, discover, and imagine. Each child should be empowered to appreciate the mascot from his or her’s unique perspective, and so we decided to leave the gender question open to interpretation.

That decision freed the creative team to be bolder and even more playful in their work. As adults, we discovered that by not assigning a gender, we became more open to the creative process, we found our own inner child, and it was liberating.

As adults, we often struggle with how to speak to children about sensitive social and cultural issues. At Please Touch Museum, we say that children learn through play. I think this time, maybe it’s the adults who can learn something through play. The lesson may be that difference should never be the primary influencer of how you experience another person.

Race, gender identity, religion, physical, or emotional challenges place people in boxes. Maybe it is time, as our logo and mascot suggest, that we consider a new approach to how we appreciate others. Maybe our mascot reminds us that the world could be a better place if we all become a bit more like Squiggles and like children from every neighborhood, from all types of families and circumstances, and embrace a curious nature and develop a capacity to welcome new things.

We believe the answer to the question of whether Squiggles is a boy or a girl should be left to each child to determine. In the end it may not matter what the answer is but that we continue to ask questions and be open to the answers even if sometimes the answer makes us uncomfortable.

Every day, kids ask, is Squiggles a boy or a girl? Our response is, “What do you think”?

Patricia D. Wellenbach is president and CEO of Please Touch Museum.