

In May 2002, The Children's Playhouse was just an idea batted around by mothers in a coffee shop in Boone, North Carolina. We were all new to the High Country community, new to parenting, isolated, and less happy at home than we thought we would be. Yet, six months later, armed with \$5,000 and a copy of *Collective Vision: Starting and Sustaining a Children's Museum*, The Playhouse was open. Looking back, we were like characters in a cartoon: finding our backs against a rock wall, we took chalk from our pockets, drew the place we needed, and walked right in.

Boone, the home of Appalachian State University, is full of contradictions. The surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains are beautiful and attract tourists year-round. Those who decide to stay can find luxurious homes with million-dollar views. Many of these dwellings are not far from the dilapidated trailers that dot this rural county, which has a poverty rate of 28.3 percent and a population of 55,000, according to U.S. Census. The university provides jobs, culture, and diversity to the town and a steady stream of volunteers for The Playhouse, but the ever-increasing need for student apartments squeezes out working families.

The Children's Playhouse's logo is a simple drawing of a house with the sun shining behind it. I asked our designer to make sure the house's door had a doorknob,

because I had read that a child's drawing of a house will always include one. For me, the door is a symbol of transformation. When children cross The Playhouse threshold, they are invited to use simple materials to explore new roles, express their own ideas, forge first friendships, and investigate for themselves the physical laws of the universe.

Many of the grown-ups accompanying our young visitors are working on their own transformation into parents. Stepping through our door, they find others who understand the joys and frustrations—and often the shock—that accompany this new role. Anyone who has had young children understands all the sticky, chaotic, and sometimes smelly clutter they create and knows the need to get away sometimes. Our



Chelsea Zimmerman

## Transformation and Community in a Small Town

Kathy Parham, The Children's Playhouse

museum is what social scientists call a “third place.” Separate from home and work, we offer an oasis rich with opportunities. As a mother once wrote, “At The Children's Playhouse, everyone feels like there's plenty of room to create, play, read, laugh, pretend, and BREATHE.”

### Who Were the Founders?

There were actually two small groups of women at that first coffee shop meeting in 2002. Both groups wanted to open a children's museum, and when each approached the local Watauga County Arts Council for support, they were advised to work together. At that meeting, I learned that over the years at least eight such groups had tried to get something similar started, but had run aground because of the lack of a suitable location. The larger of the two groups had been meeting for a while, but were discouraged by the real estate challenges.

I was new to this discussion, but I did know that the church I attended owned a house, now sitting empty, that had formerly been occupied by a childcare center. The larger group was aware of that building, but had already rejected it as too small for the museum they envisioned. The second group, led by two sisters, Ann Kiefert and Beth Darnell, was intrigued, however, and we made plans to look at the building.

When the two groups met again, Ann and Beth were enthusiastic about the site's possibilities; the other group was not. I thought the idea was dead, but I had not reckoned with Ann, who asked me to help her contact the church, the Boone Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, about leasing the space. After that, the two groups went their separate ways.

About nine or ten women were involved in The Playhouse founding, but three of us—Ann, Beth, and myself—formed the core group. We all had very young children and were new to Boone. Both Ann and I had master's degrees, and Beth had extensive restaurant management experience.

From an idea that began with the joy of play—“Let's put on a show! Let's pretend it's a museum!”—I backed into what has become my life's work. Creating and sustaining The Children's Playhouse has created and sustained me, transforming me into a different person than I was as a young mother seventeen years ago. I tended to be a dreamer who could generate a lot of ideas, but I was afraid of failure. A procrastinator waiting for permission or the perfect moment, I was all talk, no action. But my co-founders were fearless, decisive, and unwilling to wait.

Here's an example. We spent the summer before we opened rehabbing the building and looking for funding. I wrote an Early Learning in the Arts grant application to the National Endowment for the Arts, in which I proposed to combine arts instruction for The Playhouse's preschool children with distinguished author, early childhood education researcher, and MacArthur Genius-award winner Vivian Paley's story-acting methodology. However, we had to guarantee a one-to-one match for the requested \$30,000. I dreamed about bringing Paley to Boone. Appalachian State University could pay her to speak, and this would count toward some of our match. But I was hand-wringing over how to turn my dream into reality. I had looked on her publisher's website, but couldn't see how to contact her. Cutting the Gordian knot, Ann said, “well, she lives in Chicago, doesn't she?” Then she picked up the phone, called directory assistance, and handed me Vivian Paley's home phone number. Ten minutes later, I had a spoken to my hero. One year later, she was



Kate Kiefert

demonstrating story-acting in our little museum, and I was being paid for the first time from that NEA grant.

As their children started school, and Ann started a new career, Ann and Beth eventually stepped back from the day-to-day work of The Playhouse, but I remained. They both served on The Playhouse board and helped with special events for years before moving from Boone. (Ann has recently moved back in what is known a “Boone-arang” and she now crafts The Playhouse’s our social media strategy.)

### The Big Attraction of Small Places

The name The Children’s Playhouse captures pretty well the homey scale of our museum. Old but not grand, the house has a long history with local children. Dot Tugman raised her family and babysat other children here back in the 1950s; her son is now a Playhouse donor.

When our members return from visiting big museums they often say they find them “overwhelming,” and that it is too hard to keep up with their child, especially if their children are young or they have more than one. Exciting and amazing, yes, places to go for a day trip, definitely, but not to find your “village.” Out-of-towners from bigger cities frequently comment that they wished they had something like The Playhouse at home, despite the world class museums located in those cities. “It’s not the same,” they say.

At our museum, smaller rooms invite kids to slow down and give parents a chance to take a breath and maybe strike up a conversation with another parent. We provide comfortable chairs for adults. Staff are encouraged to learn visitors’ names and often introduce newcomers to the “regulars.”

Thanks to a local shop, we provide free coffee and herbal tea. This gesture of hospitality conveys our desire to support parents, which is also evidenced by our Family Resource Library, including tip sheets, discussion boards in the bathrooms, and willing listeners at the coffee pot. In one of my favorite survey comments, one visitor wrote, “Coming to The Playhouse makes a bad day good.” My hope is that families leave our space feeling calmer and more connected—to each other and to our community.



Chelsea Zimmerman

**Separate from home and work, we offer an oasis rich with opportunities. As a mother once wrote, “At The Children’s Playhouse, everyone feels like there’s plenty of room to create, play, read, laugh, pretend, and BREATHE.”**

### Exhibits and Programs Designed for Small Spaces

Space limitations have shaped our choices for exhibits and programming, but these choices have reinforced our core values. When we first convinced the church to let us rent their house for \$300 per month, there was only 1,000 square feet of usable space in five rooms on the upper level; the lower level was a flood risk. Additionally, there was 1,300 square feet of outside space, including a covered porch and a playground with a swing set. With such limited space, we focused on simple exhibits that were easy to change and open-ended programs to keep The Playhouse interesting to repeat visitors. The classic play materials of childhood—sand, water, blocks, paint—were happily within our budget.

Over the next fifteen years, we slowly carved out more and more functional space. We fixed the flooding problem and eventually doubled our usable space to include eight indoor play areas on both floors, a kitchen, an office, and two outside spaces. Our current square footage is 2,600 inside and just under 2,000 outside. In the process, what we learned about child development and play through the Association of Children’s Museums’ resources and the Childmus listserv. A playwork workshop conducted by Penny Waller and Joan Almon of the Alliance for Childhood strengthened our commitment to keeping it simple.

Exhibits at The Playhouse—a vet clinic, a farm stand, a kitchen, a blocks area, a handmade pop-up train table, a sandbox—are low-tech and full of the loose parts that endlessly delight children and provoke creative play. However, loose parts are challenging to keep up with even with our modest attendance of 14,600 visitors per year. We spend a lot of time sanitizing and weeding out broken items. I recently thanked two

moms, who joined us on the floor as we retrieved cars and blocks. “Of course,” was the reply, “this is our home!”

The two largest rooms in the museum are deliberately non-thematic. The 400-square-foot art room anchors the museum: it is the first space visitors enter. We offer three or four open-ended, all-day art activities, changed weekly. Loosely defined, “art” includes sensory activities such as making Oobleck, washing baby dolls, or conducting simple science experiments, like watching the “volcanic” outcome of mixing baking soda and vinegar. These somewhat focused topics pop up against a steady supply of old reliables: washable paint, an invitation to draw, and the pleasure of rolling out a big batch of homemade, scented playdough. So many conversations unfold while big and little hands are occupied in the playdough!

Our small scale makes the use of consumables more sustainable. However, we look for ways to provide the art-making process without a take-home product, such as inviting kids to paint the same cardboard sculptures over in the course of a week. The museum offers more than 250 informal programs each year, and our messier special programs, such as Kids Can Cook or Mad Scientist Lab, take place in the art room.

The second largest room, the Romp and Stomp room, is located in the basement. Necessity dictated that room be multipurpose, and its only fixed item is a climbing wall. The ball pit, the trampoline, ramps and balls, Imagination Playground blocks, and Thinker Linkers can all be put away, leaving an open area for programs that feature music or creative movement.

### Going Outside!

Like other museums, we tend to lose visitors in nice weather. Because our museum is lucky to have outside space, we wondered how to make it more enticing. Given the small area, we didn’t have enough space for the fall zone needed to build a large climbing structure. Instead, we researched loose parts and natural playgrounds. We poured over Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods*, the “Go Play Outside!” issue of *Hand to Hand* (2010), and ACM’s *Kids Dig Dirt! Green Paper*. Playhouse dad and artisan Rodney Underwood constructed rustic handmade fence

*continues on page 18*

es and arbors from locally harvested wood to replace the original chain link fence. Plastic climbers were banished, flowers and herbs planted, and colorful shade sails hung.

Both *Gnome Home* (2012) and the water exhibit (2018), our most elaborate installations created in collaboration with Underwood, feature simple machines. Resembling a rustic cabin with a planted green roof, the *Gnome Home* sports a bucket and pulley, which allows kids to move wood “cookies” up to the loft and down a chute. These cookies are just as likely to be used for fuel in our wooden train or carried around the yard in wheelbarrows. The water exhibit features a manually operated Bison hand pump, placed above a hidden cistern. Water flows over a handmade water wheel and descends to three levels of water tables. Movable ramps, buckets, sieves, vinyl fish, and other water toys, along with a nearby mud kitchen, stocked with pots and pans, (more) wood cookies, and stones, expand the experience.

### **Beyond Play: Caring and Kindness in a Small Community**

Play activities involving gravity are a staple at The Playhouse, but I’ve come to realize that another kind of “gravity” comes from the kind of childhood you had. Many people have experienced childhoods full of love and joy, forming a warm core within them and allowing them to soar. Others are pulled down by the long-held hurts of a troubled childhood.

The Playhouse’s scholarship program, in place from the beginning, provides free memberships to low-income families and social service agencies. These represent about 20 percent of our memberships, and are the source of many meaningful stories of the museum’s impact on the community. As one of our scholarship recipients wrote, “In our crazy life The Playhouse has allowed my child to just go be a child and forget about ‘Big People’ problems.”

Another scholarship recipient shared with me that she had recently brought her daughter to meet with an early interventionist. As I poured her coffee, the mother confided that she tended to keep to herself and had a hard time talking to others. She wondered if that had affected her daughter, who exhibited developmental delays. About six months later, she called and asked if it would be okay for her to bring someone who might apply for a scholarship. When I thanked her for introducing a new family to The Playhouse, she told me, “Oh, I tell everyone about this place.” I marveled at the change in her.

At seventeen years of age, The Children’s Playhouse may be on the verge of “adulthood,” a time of transition involving hiring additional professional staff and pondering new ambitions for a larger space. But we’re trying to do it thoughtfully, determined to find ways to scale up the intimate qualities that have made The Children’s Playhouse special to so many in our little community.

*Kathy Parham is the founder and executive director of The Children’s Playhouse in Boone, North Carolina.*



**This article appears in *Hand to Hand*  
(August 2019, Volume 32, Number 4), a  
quarterly publication of the  
Association of Children’s Museums.  
Reprinted by permission  
of the publisher.  
To obtain the full publication,  
visit [www.ChildrensMuseums.org](http://www.ChildrensMuseums.org).**