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The Construction of Pretend City

By Alex Airth and Sandy Stone

*Editor's Note: **Alex Airth** and **Sandy Stone** are the founders of **Pretend City**. To learn more, contact info@pretendcity.org*

Bill H. Lyon and Kobe Bryant at Pretend City's grand opening in 2009

In the heart of Orange County, two women were living parallel lives, separated by circumstance yet united by a shared vision that would eventually change the landscape of childhood experiences in our community.

Alex, engaged to be married, was immersed in a marketing career. Raised in an environment where children's museums played a significant role in her upbringing, her passion blossomed while consulting with the **Kohl Children's Museum** during her MBA studies at the **Kellogg School of Management**. It was here that Alex developed a profound understanding of how children's museums serve as invaluable communities.

Meanwhile, Sandy was a devoted wife and mother of three energetic boys under five, juggling the exhilarating chaos of parenting while managing a desktop publishing company. Her children's museum passion stemmed from a desire to provide children with engaging, real-world experiences that would lay the groundwork for school and career readiness.

The Beginning

In 1996, our worlds finally intersected, thanks to an introduction from our partners, who were working on a project together. From that first meeting, we discovered a mutual commitment and a shared determination to bring real-world learning experiences to life for children. Together, we set out to create an interactive, hands-on, educational, nonprofit children's museum: a child-size city where imagination could soar, inviting exploration awaited around every corner. Our dream was to establish a pretend city, a sanctuary for learning through play, supported by a hub of early childhood resources for parents and caregivers.

Research underscores a critical truth: play is an essential form of education.

Particularly for young children, whose brains undergo rapid development, play is foundational. By age five, a typical child's brain is 90% developed.

This means that while their physical size is only half-way to adulthood, their neural pathways are forming skills in relationship-building, emotional processing and decision-making that will persist in their classrooms, workplaces and throughout their lives. This understanding drove our commitment to develop a nurturing environment for children, especially from birth to age eight.

We named our child-sized, child-led experience Pretend City on Wheels for the first few years and then opened as Pretend City Children's Museum in 2009 in a leased warehouse in Irvine and have welcomed over 2.4 million children and their families from all backgrounds and learning abilities.

Young children simulate real-world roles like serving food in the café, providing medical care in the health center, stocking shelves in the grocery store and even holding elections for the mayor. Adults engage with their children while they explore, learning about their interests, and following their development because, in addition to sparking curiosity and creativity, each of the learning

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spaces has intentional activities designed to promote the development of small and large motor skills, communication skills, social emotional and self-regulation capabilities, and cognitive skills including pre-literacy and pre-math.

Pretend City visitors get excited to see the many familiar Orange County businesses supporting play such as **MemorialCare**, **Frank's Irvine Subaru**, **Brodard Restaurant** and **Trader Joe's**, to name a few. Pretend City partners with hundreds of cultural, educational, research and community organizations, working together to help children grow into the adults they will be.

No Child Develops the Same Way

In our nonprofit mission to ensure that every child has the best opportunity to develop and because not every child develops the same, Pretend City, with the support of First 5 Orange County, is a leading hub of resources and partnerships that supports the assessment and care for children with developmental delays and disabilities, including free exclusive hours for those children, their families and their therapists. Our non-clinical setting is not just the perfect environment for children, it is an increasingly beneficial training site for graduate students in nursing, occupational and physical therapy and education.

Since the beginning, countless dedicated individuals have served on Pretend City's board, committees and as staff, providing generous counsel and financial support.

"We can't achieve our goal of making learning joyful without a generous investment from our philanthropic and business community. Supporting children in their earliest years is truly the opportunity to make a lifetime of difference," said **Bill H. Lyon**, a long-time board member and donor.

It's no surprise we have reached a point where our original space is no longer adequate to support our vision and partnerships. Thanks to the City of Irvine, we are thrilled to announce that Pretend City will relocate to the Cultural Terrace in Irvine's spectacular **Great Park**. The new permanent home for Pretend City will encompass a grand 40,000 square feet of learning space and, for the first time, include critically important outdoor learning spaces.

Alex Airth and Sandy Stone at National Philanthropy Day, 2024

Construction is planned for the fall 2025 with a grand opening in the spring of 2027.

To fully realize this extraordinary and transformational opportunity, we invite families, philanthropists, foundations, schools, civic organizations, cultural groups and businesses to invest in Pretend City. Become part of our philanthropic community that believes in and invests in our youngest citizens and is creating a legacy for generations to come.

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