

The firm

By David Jacobs (Contact)

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The first thing visitors see when they walk into EdVenture, a museum for children and families in Columbia, S.C., is Eddie, a 40-foot, 17-ton tyke made of molded plastic. You can climb up his vertebrae to his brain, crawl through his heart, bounce around his stomach and slide out through his intestines. Sounds gross, but to a kid, it's a chance to learn about the human body without cracking a book.

EdVenture is one of several children's museums designed by Memphis, Tenn.-based Haizlip Studio, which has been commissioned to design the exhibits for the Knock Knock Children's Museum planned for Baton Rouge. Organizers hope to have a master plan ready to show the public by January.




Museums aimed at children, once found almost exclusively in big cities, are the fastest-growing cultural institution in America, studio founder Reb Haizlip says, reflecting a growing understanding of the importance of early childhood development. As everyone from serious academics to Fred Rogers has observed, play is serious business for a child, but Haizlip says play isn't what it used to be.

"Childhood has changed," Haizlip says. "Children don't get that unfettered sense of freedom we did as kids. We don't let kids go the way we used to." Museum exhibits that are interactive, touchable and generally kid-friendly engender imagination and problem-solving ability, he says.

Haizlip came to Baton Rouge last month to conduct what they call "dream-catching" sessions, conducting six workshops in three days with about 100 adults and more than 20 children to get a sense of what locals want from a kid-centric museum. Over the next few months, Haizlip will sift through those ideas in consultation with Knock Knock's board of directors to come up with educational exhibits that reflect the personality of the Greater Baton Rouge region.

Unique children's museums are the best, Haizlip says. They should help a child "develop a sense of who you are, where you're from, and what it means to be from that place," he says.

Kelli Stevens, chairwoman of Knock Knock's board, says Haizlip was the only group of the four who submitted proposals that planned to actually talk to kids as well as adults.



She says board members are impressed with Haizlip's work for other cities and for the Louisiana Art and Science Museum—the company designed a 20,000-square-foot addition featuring the planetarium, sculpture and exhibit galleries and classroom spaces—and felt Haizlip best understood where the board was coming from.

"We really want to create a world-class museum for our community, but we felt like we didn't want it to be a museum (visitors) could walk into and not know where they

were," Stevens says. "At the same time, we didn't want a stereotype of south Louisiana."

Stevens says the role of food and the region's various festivals in our culture will be reflected in the museum; several adults brought up childhood memories of climbing trees as something they'd like to see incorporated into an exhibit.

Knock Knock will be geared towards children from birth to age 8 and their families. Studies show humans learn more before age 3 than they will for the rest of their lives, Stevens says. Every exhibit will incorporate a literacy aspect, and she says the museum will help "teach parents to be their child's first teacher."

Museum organizers have \$5 million from the state's capital outlay budget to get started, which Stevens credited to Mayor Kip Holden's efforts, and says the board is beginning formal outreach efforts to raise more money.

The Children's Museum of Memphis, another Haizlip creation, was founded in 1990 in a New Deal-era armory building for an initial investment of \$3 million. It was later expanded at a cost of \$6 million, filling over 50,000 square feet in three buildings including storage, administration and exhibit space. Every exhibit is sponsored by a private business, and each ties into the state educational curriculum, says museum spokesman Randy McKeel, who describes the museum as an informal classroom that complements the formal one.

"The kids are having so much fun playing, they don't realize they're learning," McKeel says. Beyond the educational component, the museum is a family attraction that helps attract visitors and businesses to the city, he says.

He says the Memphis museum earns about 70 percent of its \$1.4 million yearly operating budget through admission fees, gift shop sales, birthday parties and the like, and the rest comes from donations. EdVenture says it earns about half of its budget through direct revenue, while raising 30 percent from members, sponsors and donors and the other 20 percent from local government support.

Baton Rouge Area Chamber CEO Stephen Moret says Knock Knock could be another piece of the quality-of-life puzzle that helps attract knowledge-based companies to the area.

"Projects like the children's museum are great additions to the assets we already have, such as the Shaw Center for the Arts, the Louisiana State Museum, and the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra," Moret says.

A location for the museum has not been announced. Stevens says she would prefer to see it in City Park. Davis Rhorer, director of the Downtown Development District, says there's a possibility the museum could end up downtown in connection with other unnamed projects, but says he's not at liberty to say more.

Haizlip says the museum will be about 30,000 to 35,000 square feet, with 15,000 to 20,000 square feet of exhibit space.