

# NEWS RELEASE

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## **UNIVERSAL DESIGN AWARD GRANTED TO CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS — Association of Children's Museums and VSA arts Join Forces to Expand Access for Play and Learning —**

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Follow a live ant colony down a flight of stairs; go horseback riding; experience the shimmering sensation of a rain stick; navigate new territory using a map. Now try to do these activities as a child with a disability or a special need. It's possible, thanks to the efforts of children's museums across the United States and VSA arts state affiliate offices. In recognition of the important opportunities these partnerships have created, the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) and VSA arts announced the awardees of the *Universal Design for Learning Award* at ACM's annual conference, InterActivity, held in Indianapolis, Indiana, on April 28-30.

"All children deserve access to the arts," said Soula Antoniou, President, VSA arts. "Access is achieved when children of diverse abilities have an equal opportunity to participate in and enjoy arts programs. In a field characterized by learning through doing, we are proud to support these exemplary programs in children's museums across the country."

The four 2005 *Universal Design for Learning Award* winners received \$15,000 grants to support exhibits and initiatives that demonstrate learning standards for inclusive practice.

- Lynn Meadows Discovery Center (Gulfport, Miss.) won for its exhibits that are designed to be accessible by visitors with disabilities — including its outdoor tree houses. One of its latest exhibits, "What It's Like to be Me," addresses physical disabilities directly and was the catalyst for weekend programs and a performing arts program that will begin touring this fall. Planning for the exhibit began in 2003 and involved many volunteer partnerships including a center for the deaf, an equestrian physical therapy group, a group that provides service animals, a teacher for the visually impaired and volunteers from the University of South Mississippi's Toy Library.
- The newly reopened Kidspace Children's Museum (Pasadena, Cal.) was awarded for designing all of its exhibits and galleries for accessibility and including accessible points of interaction. Examples of design decisions include choosing height clearances that provide wheelchair guests hands-on experiences like building a fantasy insect model at the museum's "Bug Diner" exhibit. When exhibit design did not allow for physical accessibility, other solutions were invented, such as cameras that follow a live ant colony down a flight of stairs.
- New Haven's Connecticut Children's Museum won for designing programs and exhibits that provide access to varied, rich and textured environments for children of differing abilities. The museum uses Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences as the inspiration and template for its design. For example, children are invited through the exhibits, to ask fundamental questions such as: What is the result of tiny stones descending inside the transparent cylinder of a rain stick?
- Boston Children's Museum was awarded for its new traveling exhibit *Access/ability*. The highly interactive exhibit delivers the message to children, parents and educators that as human beings, we are more alike than different. It includes people with disabilities as participates in fun and engaging activities that show the similarities and differences in how each of us with or without disabilities, go

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places, communicate, have fun and learn. A tactile map of the exhibit provides alternative orientations, and the message of diversity and universal access is demonstrated by the exhibit's form.

Summaries of all the *Universal Design for Learning Award* applications will be posted on the ACM Web site, [www.ChildrensMuseums.org](http://www.ChildrensMuseums.org), by June 1, 2005.

Established in 2005, the *Universal Design for Learning Award* was open to nonprofit children's museums in the United States that are members in good standing with ACM, and that have established or are working to establish partnerships with VSA arts state affiliates to develop inclusive practices. Awardees were selected by an impartial committee of museum professionals.

"By ensuring that the museum experience is accessible to those of differing abilities and backgrounds, all children can play and learn together," said Janet Rice Elman, executive director of ACM. "Providing shared experiences through interpretive and interactive exhibits is an invaluable experience for people of any age, especially children."

Founded in 1974, VSA arts is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to the participation of people with disabilities in the arts. A leader in arts based teaching and learning, VSA arts' programs support key national education goals: literacy and school readiness, teacher training, and parental involvement in education. Working through a network of affiliates nationwide and in more than 60 countries that serve over 5 million people, VSA arts' programs focus on engaging students in the arts by helping teachers create more inclusive learning experiences for students of all abilities; empowering artists with disabilities by encouraging their career paths; and supporting arts access by promoting complete access to community cultural facilities and activities for people with disabilities. To learn more about VSA arts, visit [www.vsarts.org](http://www.vsarts.org).

ACM is a professional service organization for children's museums around the world. ACM's mission is to build the capacity of children's museums to serve as town squares where play inspires creativity and lifelong learning. Founded in 1962 as a support group for directors of children's museums in the United States, ACM has broadened its services and purpose as an international association. Currently, ACM has 466 members, of which more than 280 are children's museums based in the United States and abroad. For more than 100 years, children's museums have succeeded in their mission of stimulating curiosity and motivating learning in young children. The museums complement efforts in schools, childcare centers, and homes, enriching the lives and education of children and families. Currently, children's museums represent the fastest growing cultural institution in the United States. Over the last fifteen years, the number of children's museums in the United States has grown by 100 percent, reaching more than 30 million children and families in 2004.

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