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## Cultural Events

# BEAM Exhibit Lighting Up Imaginations At EverWonder Children's Museum

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Twins Jacob and Jackson Christos (in matching shirts) and older brother Andrew — the children of EverWonder Children's Museum Director Merredith Christos — frolic in the new Beam space, the first of five new exhibits coming to the Pecks Lane museum and learning center this year. The Beam exhibit involves playing games on interactive floor projections. —photos courtesy Merredith Christos/EverWonder Children's Museum

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EverWonder Children's Museum Executive Director Merredith Christos and her staff are always looking for fun ways to stimulate the imaginations of the thousands of young people who visit the venue.

The mission of the Pecks Lane museum is to cultivate a lifelong love of learning in children by encouraging them to think, inquire, and wonder about the world around them. They do this by offering hands-on exhibits and programming to spark imagination in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math.

The museum's newest exhibit combines light, color, and simple interactive games to deliver a unique social, recreational, and educational experience for those who venture into its BEAM space near the back of the Newtown facility.

But the learning part can easily be camouflaged when virtually every visitor to the museum's BEAM space is having so much darned fun. In fact, the BEAM projection system — which was created by Eyeclick just a half-hour away in neighboring Armonk, N.Y. — offers the catch phrase, "Boredom, meet your new kryptonite."

"I actually discovered the BEAM technology because they had a system installed at the new Dental Associates office," Ms Christos told *The Newtown Bee* during a recent visit. "At the time, we were looking to update one of our spaces with a new exhibit that would be cost effective and be attractive to kids of all ages. And while it's geared ideally for kids K through fourth grade, we're seeing babies crawling on it and making it happen."

According to its manufacturer, the BEAM system involves a state-of-the-art projection screen combined with dual motion sensors that turn a normal floor into an outdoor playground, complete with engaging games, a fun social atmosphere, and lots of physical activity. The exhibit has been up for about a month.

In describing its instant popularity, Ms Christos echoes what the manufacturer touts about the system: Parents love it because they can relax while their kids release energy through play in a safe, hygienic environment. Kids love it because it's immersive and has dozens of games to play.

Ms Christos said EverWonder has contracted the system for three years. During that period, she has the option to add each existing and any new interactive game and imaging its manufacturer dreams up.

### **A New Era**

The BEAM room marks the first new exhibit at EverWonder in three years. It also marks the beginning of a new era for the cozy but diverse museum.

"This is the first of five new exhibits we are planning to add in 2019," Ms Christos said. The next installation is happening thanks to a grant from and partnership with Danbury-based Praxair Inc.

The exhibit, funded with a \$25,000 grant from the company, will be dubbed "Air Play" and is the culmination of a three-way competition among Praxair engineers vying to invent a new exhibit for EverWonder. It will replicate air molecules mixing together to create different kinds of gasses like oxygen, nitrogen, and argon and piping the various mixtures into a waiting tanker truck.

"This is the first-ever museum exhibit to be designed by Praxair," Ms Christos said.

Ms Christos said imagineer Henryk Teraszkiewicz is the brainchild behind a children's escape room that uses everything from an old fashioned steam radiator to puzzles and codes to help young visitors escape from being trapped in a laboratory.

"This exhibit is geared to kids ages 5-15," Ms Christos said. It involves applying various STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) concepts to create and solve specific challenges, she added.

The fourth new exhibit will be called "Downtown" and will involve an interactive streetscape featuring numerous well-known buildings in Newtown.

"It will turn our kitchen into a cafe, our outdoor garden into a farm market — we'll have a veterinarian's office with a waiting room, and the Main Street space will have replica buildings of Newtown landmarks," she said. This pretend play world will be ideal for children age 5 and younger.

The fifth and final new exhibit for 2019 is being conceived by a digital media professor and students at UConn Stamford and will riff on the same concept as the Beam room, except interactive projections will be put up on a huge wall space instead of on a floor.

"Our kids will be able to interact with the projections, doing everything from tracking global or local weather patterns to following the migration of specially tagged sea turtles as they swim through our global oceans," Ms Christos said.

### **Room To Grow**

EverWonder is currently retooling its in-house birthday and party offerings to key in with the new and soon-to-be-installed exhibits and will soon be unveiling a series of field trips.

While all of this new stuff can still fit within the current EverWonder space, Ms Christos envisions that the museum's growth will prompt a possible move to a new and larger location in the next two to three years. The current 6,500-square-foot space boasts attendance by more than 20,000 visitors annually, drawing from more than 220 different communities and securing annual memberships from 250 separate families to date.

EverWonder members also get privileges and access to a network of museums around the state as well as special programs and events. The museum is testing late closing hours on Fridays (7 pm) and is hosting a monthly Parents Night Out, where kids can be dropped off for activities, socializing, and food.

"It's cheaper than a babysitter, and we're working on co-promoting with local restaurants so parents can drop off their kids for a few hours and get a discount or other deal if they patronize our partnering food and beverage establishments," Ms Christos said. The next Parents Night Out is planned for March 8.

"We're also bringing in special education teachers to work with special ed students on Mondays, noon to 4 pm, when we're otherwise closed to the public," Ms Christos mentioned.

This Summer for Everyone program will also be open to attending kids' siblings and other family members, she said.

*To view all current EverWonder events, exhibits, opportunities, and ways to support the museum, including annual memberships, visit [everwondermuseum.org](http://everwondermuseum.org) or the museum's social network sites or call 203-364-4009. The museum, at 31 Pecks Lane in Newtown, is open Tuesday through Thursday, 9 am to 4 pm; Friday, 9 am to 7 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 11 am to 5 pm.*

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