



CEO mom

CEO and President of the Children's Museum of Phoenix, Kate Wells, wants every child to feel seen

After visiting many children's museums and seeing what they had to offer their respective communities, Kate Wells decided to start her own in the Valley of the Sun. She co-founded the Children's Museum of Phoenix when she was 28 back in 1998 with a few of her friends who also had young children. They pooled together their money and filed incorporation papers. The first iteration was the museum without walls. The second was the museum on wheels. Nine years and 10 months after that initial funding, the brick-and-mortar museum in downtown Phoenix finally opened its doors in 2008.

"You can be three moms in the back of a Volvo station wagon and create a major

cultural institution,” says Wells.

She has been involved with the museum for nearly 20 years.

“I still walk up to the building in the morning. It’s quiet. No one has arrived yet. And I walk in the door, and I’m like, ‘I can’t believe I built this. This is crazy,’” she says. “I’m insanely proud of it.”

She has a staff member who has fond memories of going to the children’s museum when he was young. Specifically, he remembers seeing his Hispanic culture celebrated and feeling that it was OK to be himself. His experience is what she aims to create: a truly inclusive environment at the museum.

“My husband teases me that I think I’m the mother of every child,” she says. “It’s fun that the kids can play, and we definitely impact kids’ lives. But when we truly change their lives ... That’s the best job ever.”

She tells us that the museum has a big focus on inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility, or what the organization calls IDEA. The museum is intended to serve children from birth to 10 years of age. Exhibits stay static, but programs like performance groups and art change every day. Three of the most popular exhibits—all of the exhibits were designed by artists, many of them local—include a three-story high treehouse that’s ideal for climbing, a noodle forest that features about 6,000 pool noodles hung vertically and a grocery store, which is the most popular. It’s literally a replica of a grocery store complete with a stock room, checkouts and various food sections. In the summer, the museum is slated to open a café. Wells says the toy store and gift shop complete with a selection of children’s books are also highlights.

“We have a pretty well-rounded, inclusionary set of programs that I think represent our community well and that a child can see themselves in any of our programs,” she says. “We are a place for every family.”

The museum has a program called the Every Child Program where children in need can receive free and reduced admission. In 2019, the museum served 55,000 kids and their families with this program. As a busy CEO, Wells says she changes her hat 15 times per day. She spends her work days in meetings soliciting feedback from her staff, strategy, planning and fundraising, or as she calls it “friend-raising.”



“There’s time, treasure and talent that people have,” says Wells. “My job is to help them understand why them investing their time, talent, treasure is a great investment in how it impacts the community and kids.”

Handling Professional Challenges

Any journey will be filled with ups and downs, and Wells’ story is no exception to that rule.

She left the museum for six years. During that time, she and her husband backpacked around the world with their two children. She also worked as the associate general manager of Arizona PBS. But she found herself drawn back to the museum. At the time, the museum was having financial difficulties.

“I was absolutely like, ‘I’ve put 10

years of my life into this, it will not fail!’” she says. “My intent was to just come back and make it a financially stable place.”

The most recent difficult challenge she faced was the pandemic, of course. The museum was one of the first cultural organizations to close in the area and remained closed for eight months. Like other institutions, the museum had to find ways to adapt. The organization had a program called Camp in a Box, a virtual camp, that served about 10,000 kindergarteners and first graders. The museum also popped up a 35,000-square-foot outdoor exhibit area called Adventure Play: 100 percent outside, 100 percent fun from October 2020 to May of 2021. In June of 2021, the museum reopened to the public.

During this turbulent time, Wells says her team helped the museum thrive.

"We think more voices are better," she says. "I practice what I call collaborative leadership. Especially in COVID, we found it very helpful to make very hard decisions collaboratively and really get a lot of input from stakeholders, our board, our staff, our parents. We had a medical advisory committee, and took all of that information and then made decisions. Everyone got to give input, and then people felt very heard, and with great ideas versus it just being Kate has an idea. It was very thoughtful, and then we had buy-in from everyone."

On Motherhood

She described the museum as her middle child a few times, but Wells has two children of her own.

"They're incredible young people," she says. Her oldest, Tesla Wells, is 25. They is working on a Ph.D. in aerospace and astro-engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her youngest, Phoebe Wells, will turn 22 in June. She's graduating from Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University with degrees in political science and data analytics with a minor in gender, women and ethnic studies.

Growing up, Wells was surrounded by her grandmother, mother and stepmother who helped shape who she is as a parent and a professional.

"I've had incredible role models. What they imbued in me was valuing the traits that great moms have, which are always learning and be willing to also be a teacher, willing to listen, thoughtful about your choices and being kind," she says. "Since I had all these great women in my life with all of those things, that way of being corresponds with being a good mom. It weaves its way through my entire life and allows me to be a thoughtful CEO."

She says she wasn't someone who knew from a young age she wanted to be a mom. But her husband really wanted to be a father. Many of her friends had become parents, and she decided to join them. When her first child was born, she tried staying at home but found it was not right for her.

"I was not my best mom being a mom 24 hours a day," she says. After three months at home, she returned to work. "I was really much happier having the

balance."

She acknowledges that there is no one right path for everyone. Hers just so happened to be one that involved work and motherhood.

"It was better for my kids to be around a mom that was fulfilled professionally so that I could bring my best self personally," she says. "You can choose your own path. It doesn't have to be prescribed because you decide to have kids or decide not to have kids."

When it came to being a working mother, Wells tells us she had plenty of support from a variety of sources that helped her succeed both personally and professionally.

"My husband is a very engaged dad, and he sees his role in parenthood as being as important and active as I see

mine. We have a very balanced sharing of the parenting duties," she says. The couple celebrated 30 years together in April. "I created my own job. When my kids got older I could create my own flexibility. I had the luxury of being able to flex."

In her spare time, she supports local organizations that address housing insecurity. Specifically, she works with Trellis, which aids lower to moderate-income families, and Beatitudes, which helps senior citizens.

It would come as no surprise that she is dedicated to serving the community. She has devoted her life to service, and she has a blast while helping children.

"I get to move the needle every single day in kids' lives through my work, and it's also just wicked fun," says Wells. "It's joyful. I get to make a difference."

