

Imagination Station quite the hit

Continued from Page 1
arts and craft supplies to help spark children's imagination and creativity.

The station is available for everyone in the community to use. Residents can simply stop by and take a fun item for free, or leave an item for other kids and families to enjoy. The station and its contents are routinely sanitized to ensure the safety of users.

The Imagination Station was started by Sherri Marranca with the help of her husband Joe. It was created in conjunction with the NT Neighborhood Watch, where the Marrancas are both members. The box even includes the Neighborhood Watch's "See something, say something" slogan as a reminder for kids to stay safe.

The couple started developing plans throughout fall and winter and enlisted Joe's brother, Vincent, to construct the station. By late March, it was up and running. With a prime location, just across the street from the North Tonawanda Intermediate School, the station seemed destined to be successful. However, once the pandemic hit, the Marrancas weren't sure what kind of response they would get without the foot traffic from the school.

In spite of everything, or perhaps in part because of it, the sta-

tion has become quite the hit. Its Facebook page is full of smiling-faced children enjoying not only the gifts they've gotten from the station, but the colorful and playful design of the station itself.

But it's not just the kids who love it. Parents have expressed their gratitude for having something so positive available to kids during these uncertain times.

"It was actually kind of a perfect storm. ... I don't know if it would have gotten as big as it would have without COVID," Joe says.

"I can't even tell you how many parents have come to me and cards in the mail thanking us," Sherri says. "A lot of them say they can't take their kids to the store. So to have a place where they can come and pick something out, the parents are so thankful they have somewhere to take them - and the kids are so grateful."

"And we're grateful for the community because, without them, we couldn't run this; it's all based on donations."

In fact, aside from what the Marrancas provide themselves, the station is entirely donation based. So far, the community has responded in a big way. The station has been able to run several events and giveaways this year including events for Mother's



Imagination Station (Photos by Michael DePietro)

Day, an Easter candy giveaway, and most recently, a backpack giveaway for kids heading back to school.

"It's been organic; a snowball effect ... It really seems to resonate with people. They just want to help out. It's really appreciated," Joe says. "Recently we had a bike giveaway. We wanted to give away maybe 10-12 bikes. But with donations, we ended up giving away 25. It really was a great event. Just to see the smiles on the kids faces, it was great."

One of the most popular fixtures of the station has been Chester the Chick, a fluffy little

craft bird that Sherri says started around Easter. She began posting pictures of the bird and hiding it around the station. He quickly became popular, so she put out a few more of the little birds and encouraged people to take them, photograph its adventures and share them on the station's Facebook page. Since then, the little puff has gotten into all sorts of shenanigans - from beach vacations, bike rides (and an occasional tarantula ride for good measure). He's even been photographed at the Niagara Gorge.

"Chester is the cutest thing of all. All the kids love Chester and

even the adults, they love Chester (laughs)," Joe says.

He's since gone on to inspire "Chester's Treasure Hunt," a scavenger hunt where the little birds are hidden around some of the nearby public parks. Anyone who finds one of the hidden Chesters can contact the Imagination Station's Facebook and redeem it for a special prize. Sherri says there are still plenty of prizes to give away.

Running the station and its social media accounts is no doubt a lot of work, but with the success the station has had, it all appears to be worth it.

"My wife's done a great job; she does all the heavy lifting for the project. I really can't sing her praises enough," Joe says.

Sherri says, "We just wanted to do something nice for the kids and it was important to get them away from screen time. We're trying to bring back family; get them around the table for a board games again, get them outside for sports and jump rope. ... It just happened to fall around the right time, and right place."

For more information, or to contact for donations, visit the Imagination Station's Facebook page, www.facebook.com/imaginationstationnt, or email NTNeighborhoodwatch@gmail.com.

Free admission for those who RSVP to Artpark

Continued from Page 1

The Historical Association of Lewiston, the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area, Artpark and Old Fort Niagara have teamed up to commemorate the event with a reenactment of Joncaire's land-

ing, Native American dancing, a special exhibit of artifacts from the original Magasin Royal, and historic cooking demonstrations..

The free event will allow visitors to return to the days when a Seneca village stood near the banks

of the Niagara River. It was here in May 1720 that Joncaire and 10 Frenchmen landed their canoes and began construction of a bark-covered trading post that they quickly christened, Le Magasin Royal, the Royal Store. Le Magasin became the center of Native-French diplomacy and trade on the Niagara until eclipsed by Fort Niagara's construction in 1726.

The Sept. 12 event begins at 11 a.m. near the historic gully that allowed travelers to climb out of the Niagara Gorge and ascend the escarpment. Voyageurs in period attire, carrying important trade goods, will depart Fort Niagara by canoe earlier that morning to

arrive at the Lower Landing about 11:30 a.m. A brief ceremony between Frenchmen and Native Americans will follow.

Native dancers will perform at 11:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m., while musket firing demonstrations will take place at noon and 1 p.m. Ongoing demonstrations will include Native American crafts, a display of wampum belts, and a cooking demonstration of recipes that were prepared at Le Magasin 300 years ago.

The program will end when Lawrence Claessen, representing the English, arrives to demand that the French demolish the trading post about 1:30 p.m.

There is no admission charge for the event, but attendance will be capped at 175 guests to allow for social distancing given the pandemic. Those interested in attending are required to RSVP to Artpark by filling out the form at <http://bit.ly/MagazinRoyal>.

Social distancing and face coverings will be required.

The event is sponsored by the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area and Lactalis American Group Inc.

More information about Magasin Royal 300 is available at www.magazinroyal300.org.



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Niagara Area Habitat For Humanity relocates as a result of growth, success

A necessity for a bigger office has led the Niagara Area Habitat for Humanity relocate to its new operation on 1221 Main St. Although a short distance from its old quarters, the new office allows for easier social distancing, as well as a place for clients to meet with staff.

The Niagara chapter has a

strong history with the area. From humble beginnings in 1993, it hired its first employee in 2018. During those 26 years, its managed to build 29 homes for Niagarans.

The move has not been without growing pains, however. Currently, the organization is seeking donations of office

equipment to help better perform its duties to the community. Staffers are looking for a microwave, coffee maker and conference table.

The chapter is also thanking St. Peter's Episcopal Church for its generous donation of a copier.



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