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Wegmans gives gift of play to Smithsonian



Harper Dunston, 2, of Silver Springs, Maryland, pretends to wash a carrot in a sink in the Wegmans Wonderplace exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History on Wednesday. PHOTO: LAUREN PETRACCA/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

National Museum of American History exhibit is first to be tailored for young children

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WASHINGTON

A day at the National Mall just got easier for parents with small children.

The National Museum of American History opened Wegmans Wonderplace on Wednesday as the first National Mall exhibit tailored for children 6 and younger who want to touch, hold and climb their way to learning.

The Gates-based Wegmans supermar-

ket chain is underwriting the \$1.5 million cost of the exhibit, with a 20-year commitment.

"That's what they wanted and that's what we did," Wegmans Chairman and CEO Danny Wegman said in an interview. "We're very happy to be here. And we want a long-term commitment. The Smithsonian is not going to go away and I certainly hope that we don't go away."

The exhibit includes a tugboat, a climbing tower, a small replica of the kitchen used by the late chef Julia Child and a kid-sized farm stand. Wegman said he hopes the exhibit provides a lasting memory for children. He said he still remembers seeing the dinosaurs on display

at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History — located next door to the new exhibit — when he was 7 years old.

For Wegmans Food Markets, which has been building new stores in the Washington area and will be celebrating its 100th year in 2016, the National Mall exhibit is a marquee philanthropic commitment.

The Smithsonian museums, which are free to the public and open 364 days a year, depend heavily on philanthropy to supplement the money they get from Congress.

During tourist season, the exhibit is expected to draw families from throughout the nation as well as from abroad.



Wegmans CEO Danny Wegman speaks at the Wegmans Wonderplace exhibit opening. PHOTOS: LAUREN PETRACCA/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Most of Wednesday's first-day visitors were local to the Washington area. Several said they hadn't thought of downtown Washington as a destination for small children.

Elissa Pinter, 38, of Dumfries, Va., a high school special education teacher, visited the Wegmans gallery with her parents and son Hagan, who turns 3 at the end of the month.

"He loves exploring, so I think he's having a really good time," Pinter said as her son moved between a basket of plastic vegetables and a toy cash register. "This is new, but he does like playing with a calculator."

Amy Benton, 31, of Aldie, Va., described the exhibit as "an educators' haven for kids" as she watched her 20-month-old son, Jack, play in the Julia Child kitchen.

"All the hands-on stuff is great," she said. "He loves the kitchen. He's very into pretend play right now. So, the fact that this kitchen is on his level and these pots and pans are his size, he's loving it right now. He could probably stay here for hours."

"We're very happy to be here. And we want a long-term commitment. The Smithsonian is not going to go away and I certainly hope that we don't go away."

DANNY WEGMAN

WEGMANS CHAIRMAN AND CEO



The Wegmans Wonderplace exhibit opened Wednesday at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. The exhibit is tailored for children 6 and younger.

Wegman's Wonderplace is very different from other Smithsonian exhibits that ask visitors to look but not to touch.

"They can actually touch everything," John Grey, director of the National Museum of American History, said of the Wegmans exhibit. "So the activity level, particularly for early learners, is absolutely tactile. And in the rest of the museum we do limit that. Here they play, they touch, they learn."

David Skorton, who stepped down as Cornell University president to become secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in July, said early education is vital because it comes at "a critical time for brain development and development of later capabilities."

He said there's a "common character" in running a university and opening Wegmans Wonderplace.

"They are a bit younger here today than what we used to have at Cornell, but the basic idea is the same," Skorton said.

Dignitaries participating in Wednesday's ribbon-cutting for the exhibit included U.S. Reps. Louise Slaughter, D-Fairport, and Chris Collins, R-Clarence.