

ESPN will sponsor Imagine Nation exhibit

■ The exhibit will be "an interactive video site" based on ESPN's SportsFigures series.

By JACKIE MAJERUS
The Bristol Press

BRISTOL - The Imagine Nation children's museum in downtown Bristol has a new teammate: ESPN.

The Bristol-based sports media giant recently agreed to fund an ESPN-branded, sports-themed science and math exhibit at the new museum.

The exhibit will be "an interactive video site" based on ESPN's SportsFigures series, said Mike Soltys, a spokesman for ESPN.

But the specifics are yet to be determined, and planners for the museum are expected to meet with representatives from ESPN soon.

"It's very much in its early stages," said Soltys.

Soltys said ESPN President George Bodenheimer recently toured the museum with Carolyn Thompson, director of The Family Center, the non-profit agency that is building the museum.

Bodenheimer concluded from that visit that the tie-in with the SportsFigures program would be the most logical use of ESPN's contribution, Soltys said.

"I think it'll be real nice," said Thompson, who said she is grateful to ESPN for sponsoring the exhibit, and for helping The Family Center in the past.

In a prepared statement, Bodenheimer said ESPN is proud to call Bristol home and proud of the company's support for The Family Center over the years.

"We are excited about Imagine Nation's dynamic plans that will be a centerpiece for the city, its citizens and visitors to enjoy," Bodenheimer said.

ESPN wouldn't say the amount of the donation, but Soltys called it "a significant financial and in-kind contribution" to the museum.

The donation from ESPN is a boost to the museum's fundraising drive. After working hard to raise more than \$4 million for the building, organizers - primarily Thompson - are now beating the bushes to come up with the

cash for the exhibits.

"All together, we've raised close to \$5 million," said Thompson.

But more is needed.

The building is supporting itself through a nearly-full daycare program and many classes that are held there, said Thompson.

But it cannot open as a children's museum without exhibits.

Thompson said the plan is to open the exhibits as they are completed. At first, with few exhibits finished, there will probably not be a fee, she said, because she wouldn't feel right charging admission without much open.

By fall, Thompson said, there should be several new pieces ready, including a crafts exhibit that includes the Imagination Station. She said it will include things that the center doesn't have now, like a loom or spinning wheel.

Other exhibits that Thompson wants ready in the fall are the greenhouse room and the water play area.

"That's a pretty ambitious goal, but I'm hoping," said Thompson. "The garden club is going to help us get the greenhouse open."

An old-fashioned soda fountain in the lobby could also be on tap for the fall, said Thompson, with a player piano funded by the Greater Bristol Chamber of Commerce and United

Way.

"It's going to be so great," Thompson said, because kids - and their families - will be able to see the inner workings of the piano.

Other exhibit costs come later, said Thompson, including the planned castle, astronomy and a signature musical sculpture.

"Those things are going to cost a lot of money," said Thompson, so the plan is to raise the funds for them separately.

Until the exhibit designers meet with ESPN, it's unclear how soon that exhibit will be open.

"My goals are awfully big. It'll all come together."

Carolyn Thompson
Family Center director

THE BRISTOL PRESS – June 4, 2002

The SportsFigures program is a commercial-free show designed for use in schools to teach math and physics, said Soltys. It airs on ESPN2 on Mondays at 5:30 a.m. during the school year, said Soltys, who said ESPN encourages schools to tape the show.

The award-winning SportsFigures, started in 1995, "has been a pretty big initiative for us," said Soltys. It uses celebrity athletes like Tiger Woods, Derek Jeter, John McEnroe, Jeff Gordon, Dan O'Brien and Steve Young to teach the lessons.

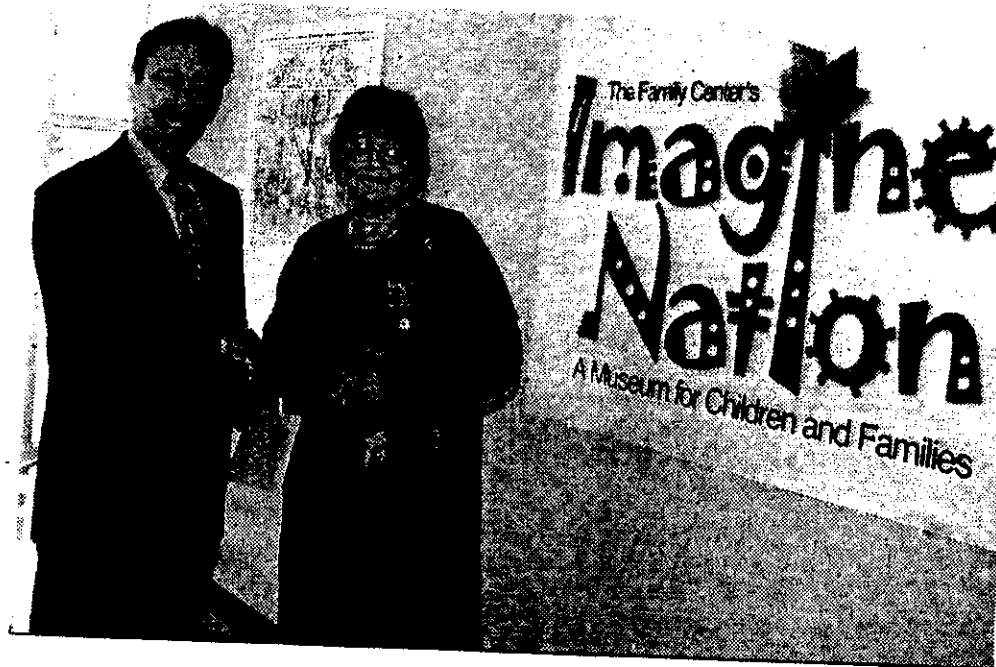
Different segments of the program

are aimed at various ages of students, according to Soltys, including high school, middle school and younger.

Episodes have used baseball to teach about the speed of sound and basketball to demonstrate the coefficient of energy.

Thompson said she's looking for donations for exhibits. At the moment, she's focusing her full attention on the museum.

"My goals are awfully big," Thompson said, but added, "It'll all come together."



George Bodenheimer from ESPN and Family Center Director Carolyn Thompson shake hands denoting an agreement for ESPN to sponsor a new exhibit at Imagine Nation museum. Courtesy Photo