

Incubator for young minds

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WAUKEGAN -- Written in green letters in one corner of Waukegan Public Library's new Early Learning Center is poet e.e. cummings's observation about the colors of nature: "The earth laughs in flowers." Directly underneath are the same words translated in Spanish: "La tierra rie en flores."

The bilingual approach reflects the mission of the new 2,200-square-foot ELC, which has taken shape over the last two years after library officials fielded a United Way survey of Waukegan kindergartners.

Among the findings of the study were that 43 percent of local children did not attend preschool, and 77 percent spoke Spanish as their primary language. As he prepared to cut the ELC's ribbon Sunday afternoon, library Executive Director Richard Lee said "some of the numbers we saw were very revealing, and very startling."

"We knew we had to do something to help out," Lee said, mentioning that half of the children surveyed had little or no exposure to books. "I'm standing in front of (a project) that we think is going to make a difference in raising those scores."

The ELC is set up in the basement next to the children's wing, in space formerly reserved for classrooms and used-book sales. Architects Tiffany Nash and Daniel Pohrte of Chicago-based Product Architecture + Design visited sites like the Highland Park Library and the Kohl Children's Museum in Glenview for ideas about active learning.

"We were trying to figure out how the hands-on experience can work in a library," Nash said. "I'd say the things you see at the Kohl Museum are most similar to what we're trying to do."

Nash pointed out that the space is divided into five stations -- music, nature, science, craft and pretend play. In each area, children from their earliest weeks through age 5 can play with things like a simulated kitchen or use computers with educational games. Books matching each theme are found in shelves lining the walls.

One dominant feature is a stage with a moving curtain and two rows of raised, carpeted seating, where children and put on impromptu performances or participate in guided storytimes. Nash said plans call for cameras to be installed so children can watch their performances afterward.

The project has been funded to date by some \$158,000 in donations, and fund-raising will continue through October 2009 with a goal of \$300,000. Library Furniture International of Northbrook supplied \$50,000 of new equipment, and the general contractor was Integrity Developers Inc., a minority-owned firm out of Waukegan.

"We also worked with a lot of minority subcontractors from around Waukegan," said Stacy L. Bullard, Integrity president of corporate and construction management.

The ELC will commence operation to the public at 9 a.m. today and will then be open during regular library hours.



Margarita Almanza of Waukegan and daughter Arianna Almanza, 4, try one of the activities during the grand opening of Waukegan Public Library's Early Learning Center for children. (Brett Nadal/Special to the News-Sun )