

GoggleWorks: Full speed ahead

Thousands jam opening of arts center in the city

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By Don Spatz
Reading Eagle

Thousands of people jammed into the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts on Sunday as it opened to the public with tours, demonstrations and music.

Some floors — such as the fourth, which is the dance floor — were too crowded at times to walk through.

“I lost count at a couple thousand,” said GoggleWorks Executive Director Diane LaBelle, who said she could only estimate the attendance at several thousand. “I never expected anything like this.”

Police said the GoggleWorks parking lot was full all day, as were the lot across Washington Street and two nearby parking garages offering free parking.

The GoggleWorks cafe, which had prepared for up to 300 guests, had served more than 500 with an hour and half to go and nearly ran out of extra food that had been brought in.

“I’ve never experienced anything like this,” Mayor Tom McMahon said.

Event organizers said more than 500 people took the trolleys from the GoggleWorks to other venues, such as the Reading Public Museum, the Albright College Cultural Center at Seventh and Penn streets, the Friedman Gallery at Al-



Reading Eagle: Lauren A. Little

G. John Butcher of Reading, a woodworking instructor at the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, creates a hollow form for onlookers attending the center’s public opening Sunday afternoon.



Mary Beth Krawlchuk of Douglassville performs a belly dance under her stage name “Maya” at the public opening of the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts on Sunday.

Children’s museum concept launched

From our news staff

Needed: 5,000 to 10,000 square feet of city space.

Requisite: Must be friendly to children.

A group sponsored by the RiverPlace Development Corp. wants to create a hands-on children’s museum and is seeking a feasibility study to help plan it, a downtown site in which to locate it and sponsors to stock it.

“We want to have a place where children can come in and play with hands-on artworks,” said Patty Miravich, one of eight members of the museum’s steering committee.

Museum activities got started during the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts opening Saturday and Sunday: The group offered baby-sitting services, using hands-on activity to keep the children occupied and learning at the same time.

Eventually, the group will spin off from RiverPlace and become a separate organization. Before then, however, it needs to get up and running.

Miravich said the museum plans its activities to focus on city history. In transportation, that could mean replica BARTA buses, or trolleys, or even canal barges.

Every children’s museum somehow uses water, and pairing that with a focus on the county’s old canal system could be fun, Miravich said.

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"I think it's neat there's such a renaissance of the arts in Reading," said one of those visitors, Rudy Schmehl of Ontelaunee Township. "I hope it's accepted, and we get a lot of people from out of town."

"Today is fabulous — my daughter will take ballet here," said Bridget M. Crawl of Exeter Township as her 4-year-old daughter, Gabriela, and Gabriela's cousin Amy Priar, 11, were having their caricatures drawn by artist Aladine Amaro.

The girls made play sculptures earlier.

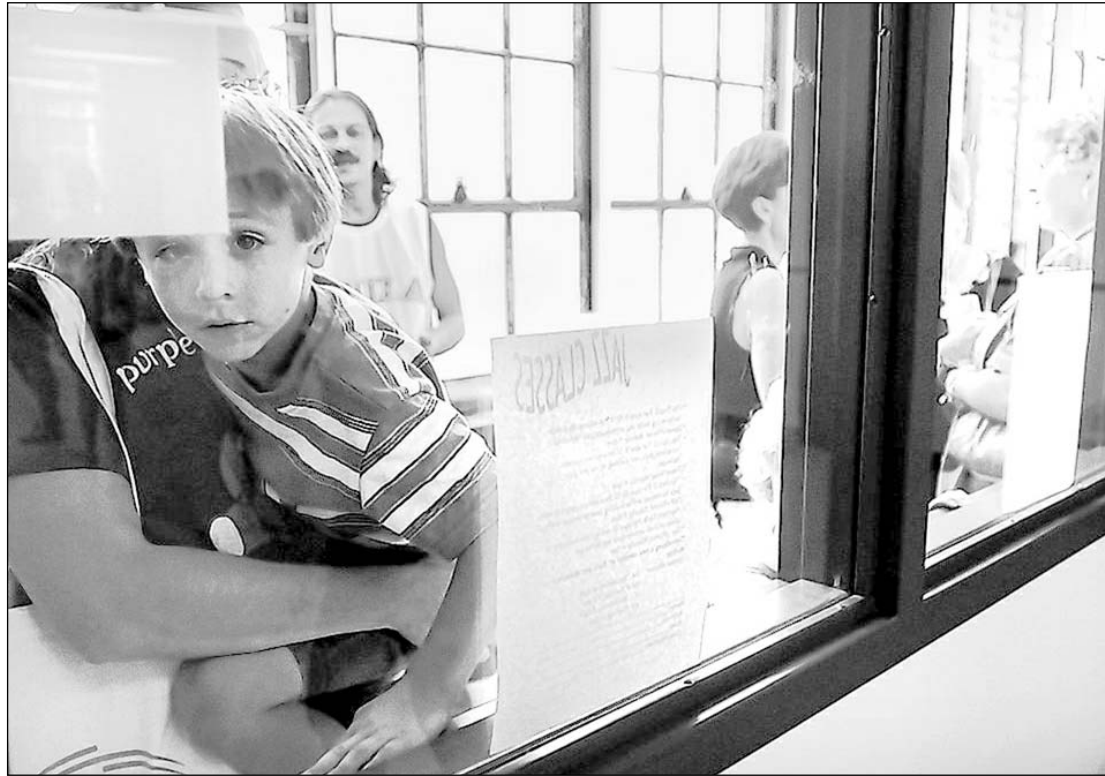
"I think they will need to keep the enthusiasm going, and keep advertising," Crawl said. "But people who are into the arts, people who are artists, people who wish they could be artists, they're all here."

The center is the result of a \$10 million makeover of the former Willson Safety Products plant.

Bea Kochel, who worked 36 years at the plant, was looking at the mosaic tile history of the GoggleWorks being created by Reading High School students.

"I'm excited about it," the 82-year-old Morgantown resident said. "I have been since I first heard about it."

Eight-year-old Helen Miller



Reading Eagle: Lauren A. Little

Held by his mother, Angel R. Biros of Reading, Thomas M. Biros peers into one of the Berks Ballet Theatre's new fourth-floor classrooms as ballet students practice at the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts on Sunday.

was looking at paintings in one of the GoggleWorks' galleries.

"My daughter likes art, and this is another avenue for her to see and learn, and maybe even to become part of it," said her father, John M. Miller of Oley.

"For someone who's got a budding artist in the making, this place is great."

LaBelle, who organized the center and spent the last six months overseeing its reconstruction, began to relax and

reveal a little Sunday afternoon.

"This has been successful beyond my wildest dreams," she said. "I knew this was going to be successful. I *knew* it."

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