

Willard Whitson, KidSenses Executive Director, in front of the old Red Rock Cola Bottling Company building that is becoming "The Factory."

A Rutherford County Treasure

KIDSENSES CHILDREN'S INTERACTIVE MUSEUM

Writer & Photographer Mark Levin

I didn't know what to expect when I entered Rutherfordton's KidSenses Children's Interactive Museum for the first time. As a former teacher I have certainly visited some exceptional museums throughout the country and in Europe. So, I think my preconceived notion would be that this museum would be fitting for a relatively small town and something locals could be proud of.

What I was not expecting was to be blown away. I was astounded by the entire scope of the current museum, the plans for an amazing addition and totally impressed with the executive director. Rutherfordton's KidSenses Children's Interactive Museum can hold its own among some of the best museums, anywhere.

It might not be the largest, though its current 11,000 square feet is no small space. Near-future plans include an additional 8,400 square feet to house "The Factory," an innovative space for tweens through teens. Then you throw in the adjacent Discovery Garden and Rutherfordton is home to a 27,000 square foot educational hands-on learning campus. It really is as impressive as it sounds.

It was my pleasure to get to sit down with Willard Whitson, the museum's executive director, to chat about the history of the museum, the scope of the museum and the plans for the future. It's amazing that a town the size of Rutherfordton could attract a professional of this magnitude. His resume is a "who's who" in the museum world.



Willard Whitson's past professional employment has included long and fruitful stints at Red Mountain Natural History Museum in Birmingham, AL (his hometown), the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences and then additional years in the City of Brotherly Love at the Please Touch Museum. Immediately before coming to KidSenses, Willard was president of the National Children's Museum in Washington, DC. Each of these are world-class museums. Willard and the KidSenses staff have plans to take their place among them.

Willard could be retired. He is "of a certain age" where he could walk away from the stresses and pressures of full-time work. Having a challenge is something Willard thrives on. The thought of leading KidSenses to the next level was too tempting to pass up.

Willard and his wife, Susan, always thought about finding a quaint small town to settle in. Rutherfordton was never on the list. Willard was

thinking some of those typical New England villages that you see pictured in Norman Rockwell illustrations. But Susan wasn't interested in going anywhere cold and it was serendipitous for both of them that Willard spotted a job listing for an executive director for KidSenses. It was fortuitous as well for the museum and the region.

Now, nearly six years into this gig, Willard and Susan have made Rutherfordton home. When he finally decides it's time to walk away, here's where they'll stay. They've already put down roots becoming involved in committees, organizations and happenings around the area. It has been a good fit.

It took the original founders nearly five years to raise the three million dollars to get KidSenses Children's Interactive Museum open in 2004. It was a testament to the hard work of these individuals and their various committees and the generosity of the residents and businesses of Rutherfordton and Rutherford County.

They also knew they wanted a facility that would

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Visits to KidSenses and the future “The Factory” can be a life-changing catalyst as students find new ways to explore their world.

Each year over 30,000 kids make a visit to Rutherfordton to experience KidSenses first hand. Additionally, another 30,000 are reached by the museum’s outreach program that travels to many of the 600 schools and libraries in a multi-county region.

To Willard, the best part of serving as executive director is working with the people – and especially his hard-working and dedicated staff. He says, “They’re like family. Everyone wears many hats.”

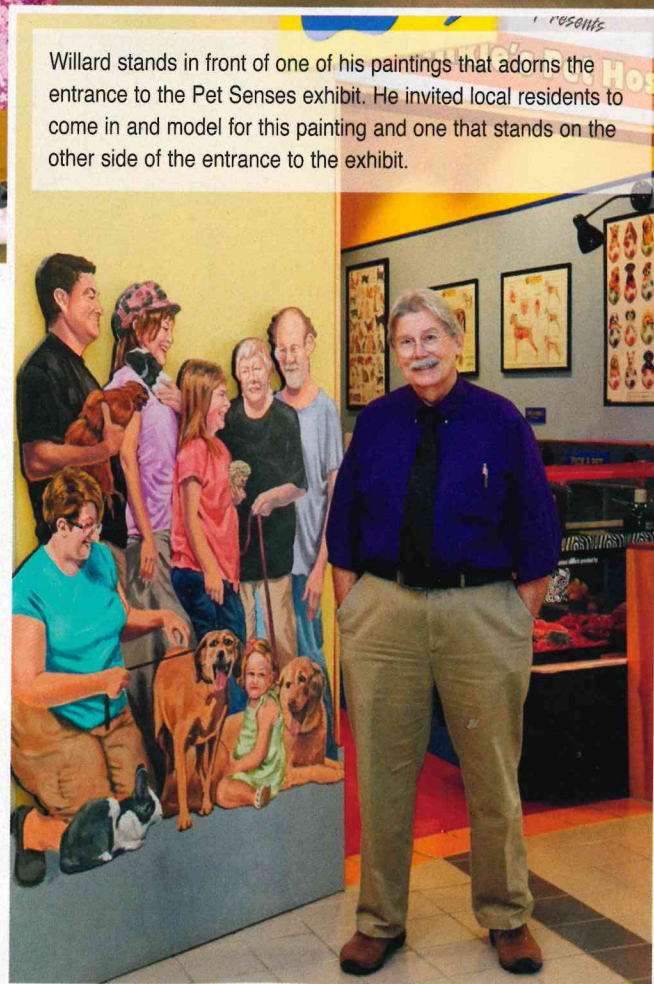
KidSenses does have a dozen or so part-time staffers that are absolutely crucial to the success of the program, and there’s always room and need for volunteers including older teens. It’s a great way to pick up life skills while helping the community.

As many of us do, Willard’s biggest stressor is worrying about the money. With any small (or large) non-profit, having the funds to fulfill dreams keeps people up at night

and Willard is no exception. But he is committed to seeing The Factory built and opened and only then will he consider what’s next?

KidSenses Children’s Interactive Museum is already a major local destination. It’s considered the number one attraction downtown and visitors often spend money in the other shops and restaurants when visiting the museum. But Willard feels that when The Factory is completed, the campus will become more of a regional destination with people driving greater distances to visit the facility. Estimates are that the current number of 30,000 annual on-site visitors could double.

KidSenses is a place where children enjoy coming back to time and time again. Exhibits change, minds mature... and each time there is a new discovery to be made. And when The Factory opens, these same children and thousands more will walk across the street with eyes wide open as they find a whole new world of discovery. Rutherfordton, Rutherford County and the entire region should take pride in this amazing learning facility in our own backyard.



Willard stands in front of one of his paintings that adorns the entrance to the Pet Senses exhibit. He invited local residents to come in and model for this painting and one that stands on the other side of the entrance to the exhibit.

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Victoria Cooper, 3 years old from Kings Mountain, visits KidSenses for her first time with parents Greta and Bill. Victoria says she's coming back.



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Special thanks to Rutherford Town Revitalization for initial and continuing support.

This sign pays homage to the original board members and some of the others who were instrumental in getting KidSenses started.

engage kids of all ages knowing that the initial museum phase would be something that would especially appeal to the younger set from toddlers through about ten-year-olds. It was always on their minds that future plans would find a way to engage youth through their high school years. That phase is in the works now.

The newest creation will be an entirely new facility located just behind KidSenses on Taylor Street in a 90-year-old building that was once home to Red Rock Bottling Company. The building has been vacant for a number of years and with that comes the need for major structural renovations. The fundraising is well underway, but it takes time to raise the over two million dollars needed to build and equip something of this scale.

The new addition will be called "The Factory" and will be the ultimate in "maker space" programming for older youth. It is an exciting concept and will include major spaces devoted to an Idea Zone, Tech Lab, Food Studio and Make It-Place.

When combined with all the interesting and engaging exhibits already established and in constant use at KidSenses, the facility will engage the minds of students of all ages. The facility helps students realize that learning is fun and can be a joyful experience.

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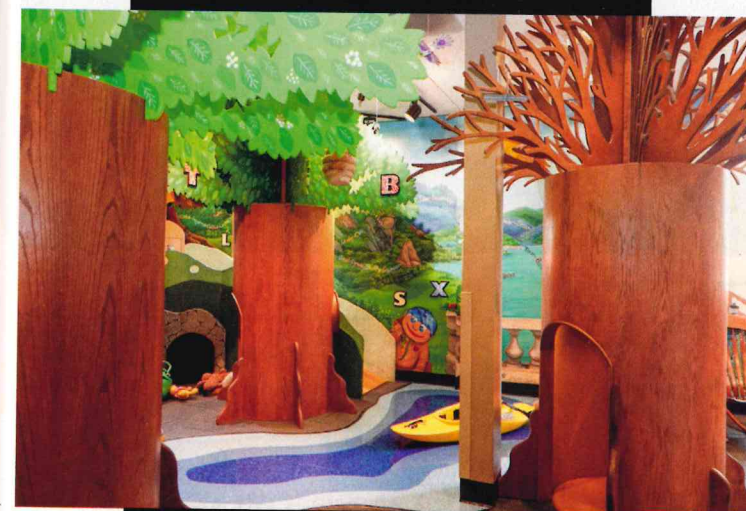
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Gale Bischoff staffs the front desk and wears several other hats at KidSenses. Gale started as a volunteer and is now "on staff."



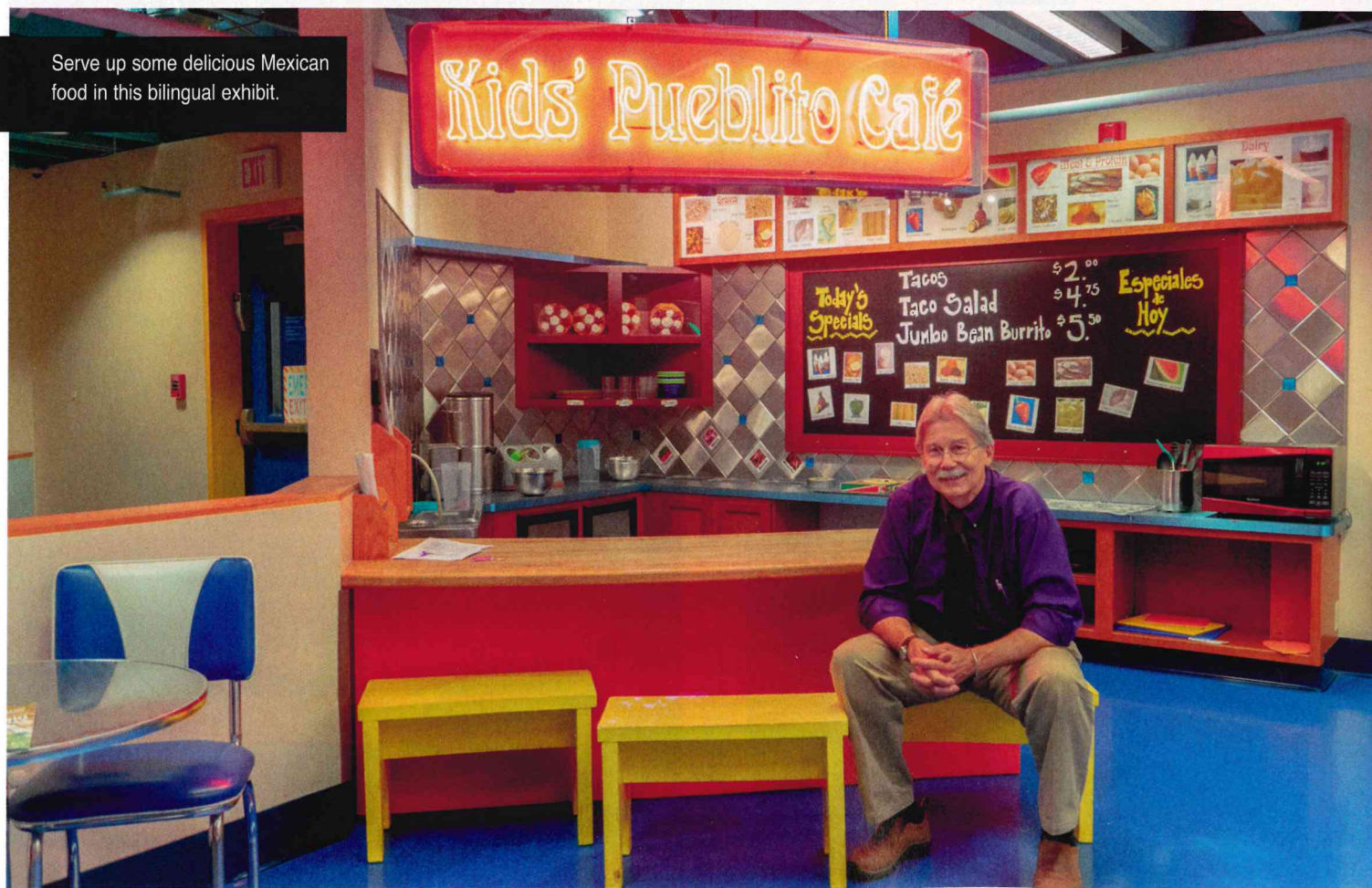
BUSINESS INFO:

KidSenses Children's Interactive Museum is located at 172 N. Main Street in Rutherfordton, NC. Phone: 828-286-2120. Website: www.kidsenses.org. KidSenses is open Tuesday through Saturday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. during the school year. There is an admission fee and memberships are available. The museum is free on the first Friday of each month with extended hours until 8:00 p.m. There's a gift shop with exactly what your child is looking for. Enjoy your visit.

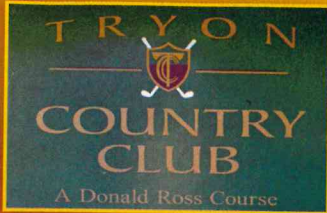


The Alphabet Trail sends children ages 1-4 on a hike around the room learning about Western North Carolina along the way.


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