

A Hauntingly Impactful Tradition & the Women Who Made it Possible

While much has changed for The Children's Museum of Indianapolis over the past 100 years, one thing remains unshakably the same: women have always been at the heart of its growth.

In 1925, Mary Stewart Carey and four other bold women rallied around the idea of starting a museum for the children of Indianapolis. Though the notion of creating a museum where children could learn and play was ambitious, even radical for the time, these women were determined to make it an iconic facet of the city's cultural fabric. Before long, their dreams took root and grew into what is now recognized as the world's largest children's museum.

With women-led service being a cornerstone of the museum's success, a separate group of eight women banded together in 1933 to form The Children's Museum Guild. Their mission was simple: support the museum through volunteering and fundraising. And for the past 92 years, the Guild has remained a powerful, independent volunteer organization composed entirely of women.

"When I think about the museum centennial," says current Guild President, Lauren Rapp, "I'm reminded of a quote by Margaret Mead: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.' Reflecting on the museum and the Guild's story, I'd offer the edit: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed women can change the world...'—because without these women, the museum would not be where it is today."

The Guild: Service at its Core

Today, the Guild includes around 100 active members and more than 500 associates—representing a diverse cross-section of Indianapolis and its surrounding communities. Collectively, the Guild clocks nearly 40,000 volunteer hours each year, providing vital support to every aspect of the museum.

Their work spans many initiatives, like integrating exhibits into classrooms, partnering with InfoZone Library to read to local schoolchildren, supporting the Riley Children's Health Sports Legends Experience®, planning the Museum's neighborhood holiday party, and awarding scholarships to museum interns.

The Guild's most significant and impactful initiative? Its annual Haunted House. Debuting in 1964, the first haunted house drew 26,000 visitors over 10 days and raised \$13,200—making it a resounding success that kicked off a beloved tradition. Today, it holds the distinction of being the longest continually-running haunted house in the nation, with over 3.3 million visitors in its 61-year history. Most notably, it's responsible for raising nearly \$17.4 million to date, with over \$3 million raised in the last six years alone.

Guild members handle every aspect of the haunted house, taking on tasks like developing the theme, sewing costumes, designing/building rooms, managing operations, and more—all to raise funds for the museum's educational programs and exhibits. In fact, the Guild is the museum's largest annual donor.

In 1975, for example, Haunted House proceeds helped launch a new pre-history exhibit. This year, in honor of the museum's centennial celebration, the Guild is pulling out all the stops with a one-of-a-kind takeover and theme: Bewitched BOOseum.

Museum Takeover: Bewitched BOOseum

For the first time ever, the Haunted House will feature some of the museum's permanent exhibits and iconic moments from its 100-year history, making it feel as if the museum has been brought to life in one eerie, haunted adventure. This is all thanks to Guilda, the museum's resident witch, whose magical mishaps have transformed current or former exhibits into creepier versions.

"This is a big year for the museum, and we wanted to make sure the haunted house and everything we're doing reflects that," Lauren Rapp explains.

Visitors can choose from two haunting experiences:

Friendly Haunting Hours (Tues–Sun, 10 am–3 pm; extended to 6:30 pm on Wednesdays), courtesy of Shepherd Insurance and Financial, offers a family-friendly scare complete with candy, toothbrushes, and free bike helmets on Wednesdays from the Indiana Department of Transportation.

Frightening Haunting Hours (Thurs–Sat, 4 pm–9 pm) are for thrill-seekers looking for a more intense scare. Every guest receives a free book on Saturdays, thanks to the NCAA®.

The centennial celebration brings even more excitement:

- Oct. 6: Guild witches will descend on the Canal Walk for a magical takeover you won't want to miss
- Oct. 10: Opening Day; First 500 visitors receive Indiana Pacers or Indiana Fever tickets
- Oct. 14: Final Four gift bags for the first 500 guests; Starting at 4 pm during Friendly Hours, [Museum My Way](#) allows individuals with physical/sensory sensitivities to enjoy the house
- Oct. 17: During Frightening Hours, meet the Circle City Ghostbusters from 4 pm–9 pm
- Oct. 21: Crew Carwash vouchers for the first 300 adults and toy spinners for the first 300 kids
- Oct. 28: Celebrate the museum's 100th birthday and receive a special treat

Tickets are \$8 for museum members and \$9 for non-members, with group discounts available. All proceeds go directly back to the museum, and the haunted house is fully accessible—even the iconic “spinning” bridge at the end of the house has been adapted for strollers, wheelchairs, and other devices.

As Indianapolis celebrates the Children's Museum's centennial, there's no better time to witness—and support—the incredible work of the women behind it all. This is more than a haunted house; it's a tribute to the magic that happens when women come together to serve their community.

"I know I speak for the Guild as a whole when I say that we are just so proud of the museum and to be associated with it," Lauren muses. "100 years is incredible for any institution, but especially one that's specifically for kids. Our goal is to play an integral role in the museum into the next century as well."