



Helen Walton Children's Enrichment Center officials, donors break ground on new facility

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A 44,000-square-foot children's enrichment daycare center located adjacent to the Scott Family Amazeum along J Street near the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art will soon be a reality. The project goal was \$14.3 million and with 94% of that amount raised, ground was ceremonially broken for the new [Helen Walton Children's Enrichment Center](#) Thursday (Oct. 19).

The new center is expected to be complete in early 2019.

Kyle Peterson, executive director for the Walton Family Foundation, said it was fitting to break ground on the future site of a center that will bridge creativity, culture and education in one unit on what is also the Walton Family Foundation's 30th birthday. Peterson said three decades ago, Helen Walton brought business and community leaders together to talk about what could be done to ensure children's educational needs are being met before they begin kindergarten.

"She [Helen] listened to what the community needed, put together a board of directors and provided seed money for what you see today. She saw a connection that if you could provide learning early it would pay off in the years ahead in education. This ground-breaking is important to the foundation and it's a symbol that represents a bold step forward while always listening to the needs of the people in this community and providing for the children who are our future," he said.

Julie McKenzie, CEO of Welspun Group, formerly with Nickelodeon, also spoke at the event, saying she was fortunate enough to get her young son into the Helen Walton Children's Enrichment Center when her husband was recruited to Northwest Arkansas more two decades ago to work for Wal-Mart Stores. McKenzie said she was fortunate enough to be able to tour 10 of the country's top children's care facilities with Walton, who insisted that the local center benchmark against the best of the best.

The new center is roughly 13,000 square feet larger than the present facility, which will enable the center to train other daycare professionals on site, said spokeswoman Sunny Lane. She said the center's enrollment will remain constant at 240 children and there is a long waiting list for entry, which is why the additional space was added. She said being able to provide training to the other 500 early childhood programs in the region is the best way to export the Bentonville center's expertise.

John Furner, CEO of Sam's Club, also spoke at the event, saying the need for quality childcare has never been greater as 70% of women with children under five years old are working. He said centers like the Walton center ensure women with young children can stay in the workforce which is important to him as an employer.

"This center is just one of the ways this region is improving its education system as we have improvements in healthcare and some investments in culture which make this a great place to live," Furner said.

Furner said children who have the right kind of early learning are three times as likely to do well in high school and more likely to get college degrees. He said early childhood education is a game changer and even a life-changer for a lot of people.

"This is a great start," he added.

Michelle Barnes, director for the children's enrichment center, said this has been a labor of love by many who wanted to see this center grow so that an additional 32,000 children might also get a similar experience as the 240 in the Bentonville center. The training the new center will provide ensures its vision for early childhood reaches across the entire region, she said. The expanded training center will be wired for distance learning sessions and include larger collaboration rooms and a new resource center



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Barnes said she remembered well the day she interviewed for her job 18 years ago with Lynn Walton, Helen's daughter-in-law who is married to Jim.

"I didn't interview with Lynn one time, not twice, not three but four times," Barnes shared as she said this day had unleashed a floodgate with memories flowing freely. "This is a great day because we get to take what has been on paper for two years and go vertical," she said.

The "It Takes A Village to Raise a Child" campaign began in September 2015.

Barnes thanked several key sponsors for the project such as Walton Family and Walmart Foundations, Tyson Foods and individuals and businesses who also donated to the project. She said it was important for the board when planning the new center to not pass any of the expense on to the families in Northwest Arkansas.

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