

Brookside Neighbors

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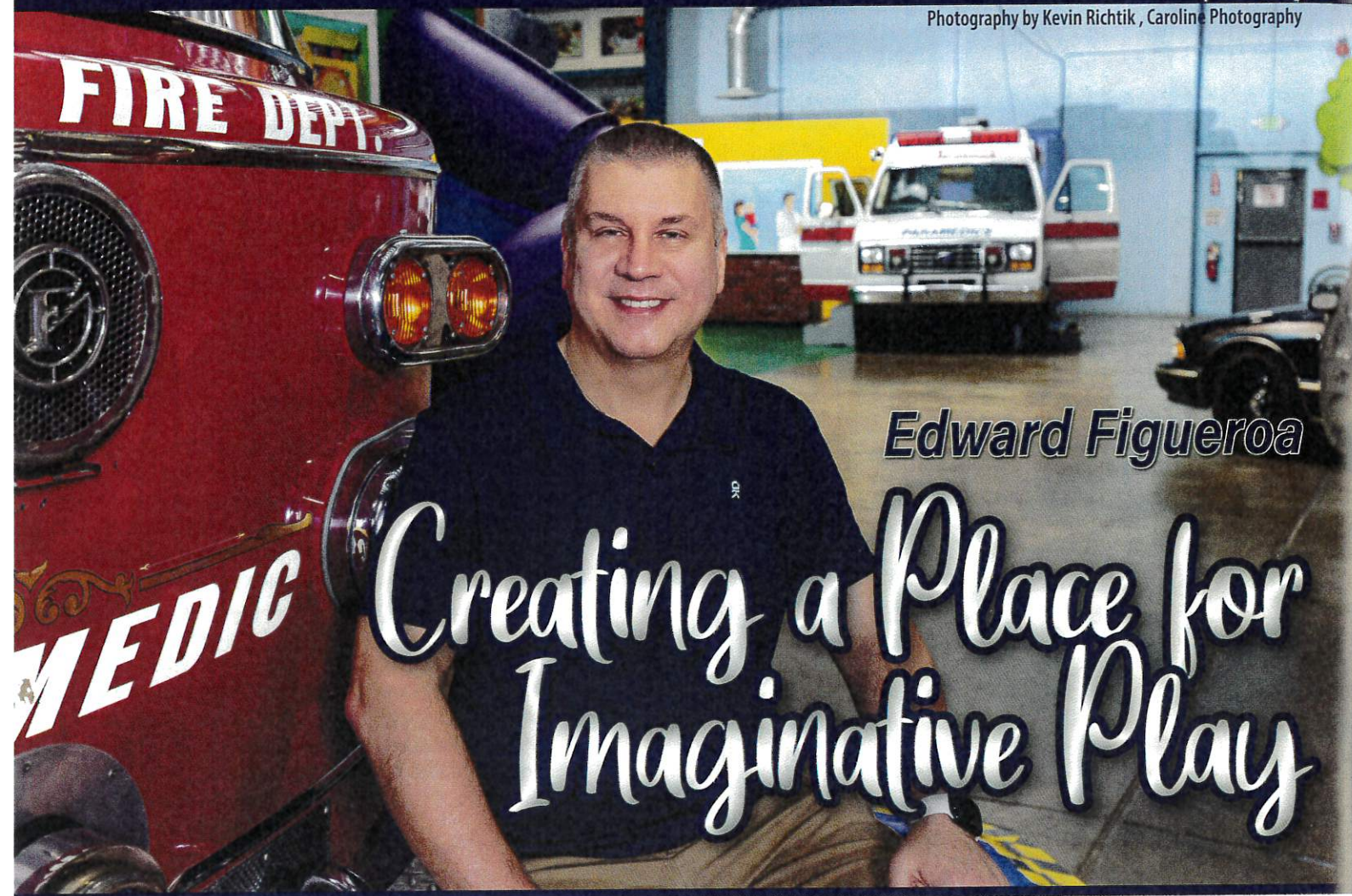
Edward Figueroa

*Creating a Place for
Imaginative Play*

Cover photo by Kevin Richtick, Caroline Photography

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*Edward Figueroa*

Creating a Place for Imaginative Play

Ofentimes, something incredible is borne out of tragedy. It is not always the case, and it shouldn't be that we get ignited into action when a terrible event has happened, but this was how Stockton's Children's Museum came to be. In 1989, one of the first shootings at a school was right here, at Cleveland Elementary. Five kids were killed under the age of 9, and it was the deadliest school shooting until Columbine in 1999. Nowadays, it is sadly all too common, and while communities are reeling from the staggering number of people affected by trauma, one of the teachers who was wounded, Janet Geng, became the Founding Director of the Children's Museum. They opened their doors in March 1994, in order to provide a wholesome environment for kids to play and learn in with interactive hands-on exhibits.

Since then, the museum has grown and undergone different renovations and board member changes. Enter Edward Figueroa, who in 2022, found himself at a crossroads. He had worked his entire professional career in the non-profit sector, primarily at St. Mary's Dining Room, an organization that works with the unhoused and impoverished of our community. While he loved the work, he decided to step down as CEO after 25 years. He began looking for different and new challenges in the local area.

For some, non-profit work is merely a stepping stone onto another career path. For others, like Edward, it is the path itself. He didn't

just want to do something different; he needed it to be equally rewarding and compelling. He still wanted it to have purpose and mean something. In 2024, he found what he was looking for. The Children's Museum of Stockton has been a staple in the Stockton community for over 30 years with its 25-foot-tall toy soldiers becoming an iconic visual for the city in 2002. It was there, in March of 2024, with the red and blue toy soldiers keeping watch, that Edward entered the museum for the first time as its newest executive director.

He spent the rest of that year learning about the museum, greeting the children who walked through its doors, and understanding the nuances of leading this new challenge. He found the museum was beloved by the board, staff, and the community alike. However, much of the time and effort in the past 30 years had been put into keeping the museum afloat-- a daunting task for any non-profit and one that delayed renovations to many of the exhibits so it could keep the doors open and the lights on. Covid brought on additional challenges, and while still able to tread the waters of financial viability, it was becoming increasingly difficult.

That is the reality Edward found himself in when he became the museum's Executive Director. However, it was not an unfamiliar landscape, and it was one he believed he could work to transform. Thus, after a few months of learning operations, he started the



work to move the museum from a survival-based model of fundraising to one of long-term sustainability with donor investment at its heart. They decided to offer The Power of Play tours, which are one-hour informational tours held twice a month at the museum to educate the community about the importance of play, the needs of the museum, and give ideas as to what ways individuals might be able to help. In his words, "The museum allows children to use their imaginations to the fullest. It's amazing to see and hear the stories of play they create. Hearing the children playing outside my office door is an easy reminder of why our team and I are working so hard to increase our community support. We want this place to be here for the children for another 30 years and beyond. The reality is we need funds to do that, and the tours are a great way for people to understand what our presence offers to the community."

In addition, the museum has a new tag line which reads, "Where our day is child's play!" This change signals the shift from direct education to play as its focus in how the museum presents its exhibits to children. "Play is education," Edward says. "So instead of having things they need to read, here they learn through their imagination and hands-on interaction. We know that children need unstructured play and that facilitates all sorts of learning and education with the child. It all comes down to play." Gone are the many signs detailing everything from how to interact with the exhibits to making sure each exhibit's props stay in its 'correct' area. "We took all that away," he says. "If a child wants to be a veterinarian in

our space shuttle or have a puppet show in the firetruck, we are all for it because it means they are having fun and using their imagination. It is their museum, after all."

I truly believe that if we can make play and whimsy as important to our children, and ourselves really, as we do math, science, and sports, it would change the world for the better. The lessons of play are ones that stay with you well into adulthood!

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COVER STORY (cont'd)



Children from all over the region are getting the chance to see this firsthand as the museum hosts school field trips and birthday parties throughout the year. As he works to build the financial sustainability of the museum and educate the community about why play is so vital in a child's life, Edward contemplates the idea that his work with the Children's Museum of Stockton has helped his non-profit career come full circle. "I truly believe that if we can make play and whimsy as important to our children, and ourselves really, as we do math, science, and sports, it would change the world for the better. The lessons of play are ones that stay with you well into adulthood!" This museum is truly a gift to our community and to the present and future generations it serves. 

**CHILDREN'S
MUSEUM**
STOCKTON
WHERE OUR DAY IS CHILD'S PLAY!

The Children's Museum of Stockton is open Wednesday - Friday, 9am - 4pm and Saturday and Sunday 10am - 5pm. Admission is \$10 per person; infants under a year old are free. Annual memberships are also available for purchase at three different levels. Two of the levels include access to the ACM Reciprocal Network program, which offers 50% off general admission for up to 6 guests at over 200 participating museums nationwide. It is definitely well worth the cost.

For more information or to RSVP for an upcoming Power of Play tour, please contact 209-465-4386 or visit their website at www.childrensmuseumstockton.org.

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