

Hundreds of area children participate in 'Movie Day' at Tennessee Theatre

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Hundreds of children experienced “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory” like never before during the Youth Arts Alliance Kids’ Movie Day.

Children with the Boys and Girls Club of the Tennessee Valley and the Knoxville Parks and Recreation Summer Playground Program filled the Tennessee Theatre on Tuesday and watched in awe as Bill Snyder played the “Tennessee Waltz” on the theater’s original organ as it descended below the stage, signaling show time.

The event was funded by the Youth Arts Alliance, making it free for all children — most of whom have never been to the theater, according to Tennessee Theatre Executive Director Becky Hancock.

Andrew Las, 10, and Aniya Garner, 12, were first-time visitors of the 1920s theater, and they were most impressed by one thing — the chandeliers.

Las said he was surprised when he walked in, after the building surpassed his expectations of a “little movie theater,” while Garner said she wished the theater were her house.

Children received a snack bag, provided by the Historic Tennessee Theatre Foundation and Whole Foods, upon arrival and left with a drawing of the theater stage’s arch to color and keep as a souvenir.

Before “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory” began, Snyder gave the children a brief history lesson about the theater, which opened in 1928.

Frances Dougherty, field service director of the Boys and Girls Club, said Movie Day was an adventure different from the club’s usual trips.

“It’s an experience they’ll have forever,” Dougherty said. “I tell them, ‘Whatever you do with the Boys and Girls Club, when you get a job after college it’s something to talk about at the water fountains.’”

Movie Day was also a rarity for the Parks and Recreation Department’s Summer Playground Program. Recreation Superintendent Kristin Manuel said exposing children to Knoxville’s history and art helps the city grow.

“If you want anything to stick and you want it to continue to grow, then you have to do it with different generations,” Manuel said. “If you just do one, it’s going to stop there. To be able to get the kids in here and show them that there are exciting things to do downtown they’re going to ... bring their parents downtown and experience it with them.”

Interest was sparked in some children before reaching their seats, Dougherty said, as they had already asked to come back downtown, which she credits to the liveliness of the area.

It’s a liveliness Hancock believes young residents should be introduced to as soon as possible.

“(Movie Day) helps build our next generation of theatergoers,” she said. “It makes young children have a connection to this place the same way my parents and grandparents did.”

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