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Imaginations unfurl at ImaginOn

\$41 million home of library, kids' theater is a hit with its first young visitors

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Staff Writer

Imaginations unfurl at ImaginOn \$41 million home of library, kids' theater is a hit with its first young visitors When ImaginOn opened its doors Saturday, 7-year-old Anna Glenn headed straight to the library shelves to find a book on origami.

Emmanuel Opolot, 9, and John Weilkhe, 11, visiting from Uganda, went backstage to learn how theater sets are built.

Zoe Goldstone, 15, found a computer in the Loft to study whale songs for a school project.

And Leo Merrick, 6 1/2, checked out each of the 250 seats in the Wachovia Playhouse by walk-running down every row.

"I'd pick the top row in one of the green chairs to watch a play," he said.

About 8,000 attended the grand opening of ImaginOn: The Joe and Joan Martin Center, new home to the children's library and Children's Theatre of Charlotte. Festivities began with speeches outside the uptown building.

Charles Brown, director of the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County, said ImaginOn was unique. "As far as we know," he said, "(there's) nothing like it anywhere in the world."

Parks Helms, chairman of the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners, called it a great day for imagination. The \$41 million building



Tabias Moye, 8, plays on a computer at ImaginOn Saturday. "This place rocks!"

exceeded original cost estimates, but the result, he said, "was worth every penny."

Mayor Pat McCrory quoted (but didn't sing) a John Lennon song: "You may say I'm a dreamer ..."

"I want to compliment all the dreamers," he said. "A dream has now been fulfilled."

But Joan Martin drew the most applause. The building is named for Martin and her husband, Joe.

"I have had some years to think of the appropriate word that goes along with this moment," she said.

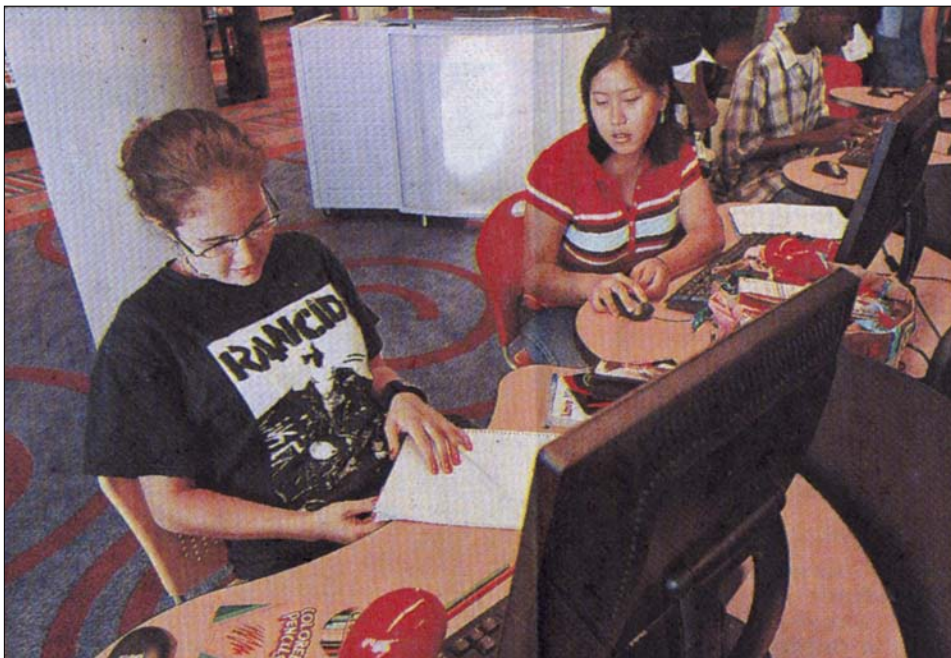
The perfect word, she decided: "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

Joe Martin, diagnosed with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) in 1994, used an alphabet board to convey his feelings.

"Joan and I have talked often about the 'flabbergastment' of having our names on it," his wife quoted him as saying. "Neither of us sees this as a deserved reward."

The center was named for the two civic leaders in honor of their longtime interest in education. Joe Martin was a Bank of America executive, and the \$13 million endowment campaign was led by Ken Lewis, BofA chairman.

After a man in a blue wizard's costume brought forward a gigantic key to "unlock" the door, families streamed in.



Chastity Chain, 16, (right) in the Loft researching a school project on the "hierarchical cultural impact on behavior": "The computers are excellent. It's more comfortable to work here and more relaxing." "Even today," added her friend, Zoe Goldstone, 15, (left).

CHRIS KEANE

By noon, the line to get in stretched nearly one block. Novello's WordPlay Saturday was being held outside ImaginOn with crafts, performances and activity booths.

Inside ImaginOn, kids got right to work.

"This place rocks!" said Tabias Moye, 8, playing a computer game.

Fatimaakeelah Elijah-El, 6, made a cartoon in the Studio i.

Emilee Love, 7, of Rock Hill, and her sisters, Heather, 5, and Lizzie, 3, crawled inside a puppet theater.

Others created stories on computers, toured the costume design room and explored the Loft, an area for teens.

The ImaginOn project has been years in the making. Saturday, library and Children's Theatre employees were elated at the turnout.

"Now it feels real," said Melanie Huggins, youth services director for the library.

Said Bruce LaRowe, executive director of Children's Theatre: "For all of you children, this is a place for you. Bring your friends and come often."



Grace Glenn, 7, (right) arranging ottomans in the shape of puzzle pieces with her twin sister, Anna: "I like it. I'm going to look for a Magic Tree House book."



Leo Merrick, 6 1/2, in Wachovia Playhouse: "There's a theater and a library. It has a lot of room. I think the chairs (in the theater) are very colorful."