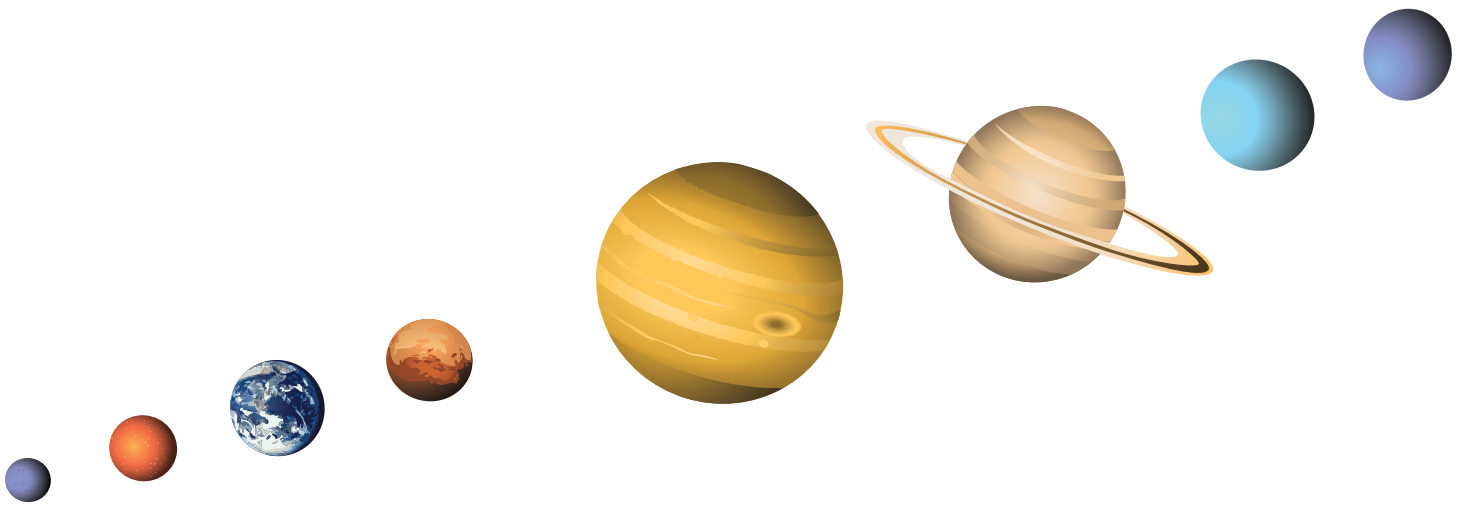


*A visitor explores space and rockets at CHOM.*





# CHOM

*marks thirty years*

by Margaret Clevenger

Since 1984 the Children's Hands-On Museum, CHOM, has been a center of adventure, excitement, and discovery for children from West Alabama and beyond.

In 1988 CHOM founders moved the museum from its temporary location on The University of Alabama campus to downtown Tuscaloosa. At that time nobody dreamed the nonprofit museum would one day house two dozen exhibits and include a third level for multi-purpose activities. Much of the museum's expansion

has come under the leadership of Charlotte Gibson, executive director of CHOM since 2005.

"We've done a lot of fun things here, and we've had a lot of good supporters who were interested in keeping the old and adding some new," said Gibson, who came to Tuscaloosa from Troy where she was director of a historical museum.

Since Gibson's arrival, CHOM has added onto, upgraded, or enhanced almost all of the exhibits. Gibson stressed that she and her staff have sought to use every square

inch of space available to them.

"Our focus is to answer the challenges that kids give us," Gibson said. "Children have great creativity, so we needed to make some changes within the exhibits to continue to add things that are interesting and that will help children learn, create, and discover. And that's why we've been so focused on adding programs and exhibits that weren't here."

One of those exhibits that was added in 2005 is Once Upon a Farm, designed specifically for developmental play for newborns





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through three-year-olds. The large area is divided into separate spaces, one for babies and one for toddlers through age three. The exhibit is the first of its kind in Alabama.

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fascinate children as they have for years.

CHOM has worked closely with the Tuscaloosa city and county school systems since the museum first opened. Teachers from both public and private schools can reserve space to bring their classes to the museum for educational programs. Home-schooled children can also participate.

Exa Skinner is the coordinator of education and oversees the programs for the kindergarten through fifth grade classes that come on field trips to the

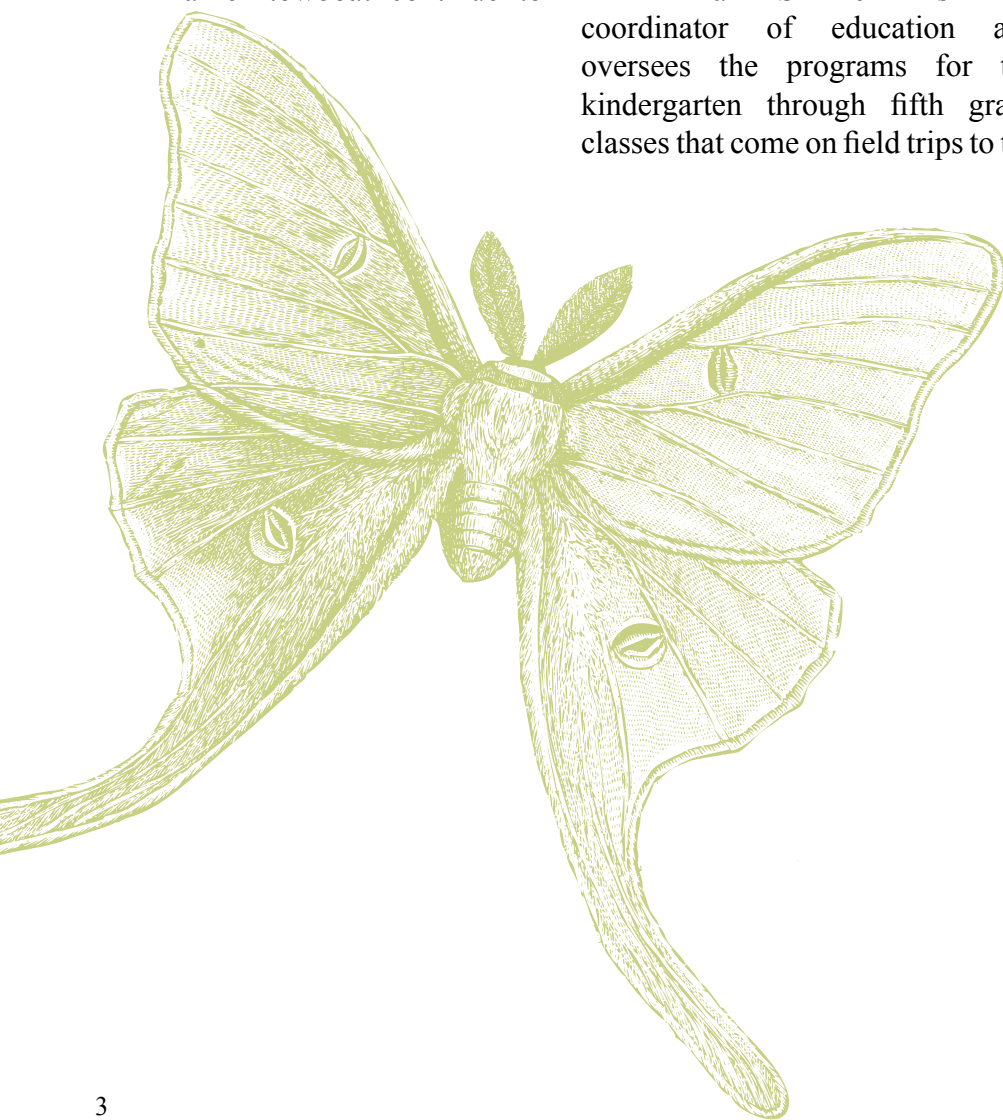
museum. "We follow the Alabama Course of Study, as well as the new Common Core standards," she said. "We have a lot of correlation to what teachers have to teach anyway. We just provide a little more of a hands-on experience, more of a memorable time than the things that they can do in the classroom."

Skinner said that the education staff at CHOM are often updating their programs to keep the subject matter fresh and relevant. "We've done a lot of work this year rewriting things."

"And we have one program that is absolutely brand new, and it is all about weather," Skinner continued. "This is one of the programs that we call demonstrations. We set that up before the class arrives, and then take it down after they leave. So teachers can book those whenever they want to, and it is not seasonal like some of our other programs."

In 2010 the museum added the CHOM on Wheels outreach field trip for pre-K that the museum delivers to the Tuscaloosa city and county schools. Kelly Fowler, who is certified in early childhood education, is the coordinator of that program.

"We take a couple of our most popular programs into the schools and put on an hour-long program for them," Fowler said. For two months of the year, the CHOM teachers try to fit in as many pre-K





*The Lil' Sprouts Farmer's Market, a new display.*

classes as possible. In October the spotlight is on bats, and in April bugs are the focus.

"Everything we do here, we try to make it as hands-on as possible because that's how a lot of children learn," Fowler said. "So we take a taxidermy bat and pass it around and let them touch it. And we talk about how a bat is different from any other mammal."

Fowler also teaches the pre-K programs for the walk-in visitors to the museum. Those programs vary from classes for expectant moms and newborns to science and music for children through age five.

Kiddie Kitchen is a cooking class where kids, ages two to five,

can learn how to make snacks. "It's a lot of fun, and we take it step-by-step," Fowler said. "We usually have a story that goes along with it."

Carla Bailey has been at CHOM since the museum moved downtown. She serves as bookkeeper, facility manager and is in charge of rentals and birthday parties. With only six full-time employees at CHOM, everyone has a wide range of duties. "We all wear a lot of hats," Bailey said.

CHOM is a popular place to hold a child's birthday party whether through the week or on a Saturday. "We provide all paper products, utensils, the party room, and a party coordinator to assist," Bailey said.. "As long as I can get

paper products and favors to go with it, you can have any kind of theme party that you like." Theme parties have included Dora the Explorer, Thomas the Train and Tinkerbell. Bailey also books birthday parties for adults, retirement parties, bridal showers, and wedding receptions.

When Kesa Gray was growing up, she often spent her days pretending to be an on-camera television personality at the former weather station exhibit at CHOM. "I came here for as long as I can remember," she said. "So it's kind of like my heart."

Gray started working at CHOM as a work-study student at The University of Alabama in the fall of 2006. She was offered a full-





*Candyland Breakfast with Mr. and Mrs. Claus.*

time position in 2010, and is now the administrative assistant and membership coordinator for the museum.

“We have about 450 yearly members and another 45 Go Pass members,” Gray said. “A Go Pass is valid for four months and is for those pass holders who might not be here for a full year. We just started it last June.” The museum also offers a Holiday Pass that is good from November 1st until January 31st.

Gray said the most popular pass is the one offered for the three months of summer. “There are a lot of families that come from out of state, and that pass lets them do things we have here in the summer. That’s when we have our upstairs open and have arcade-like games, which is great for older kids.”

In May CHOM will hold its 8th annual Rubber Duck Derby, the museum’s major fund raiser. The event awards cash prizes ranging from several hundred dollars up to

a couple of thousand dollars for first through third place winners. There is even a chance to win \$100,000. “If somebody would win it, that would be the best advertising that we could get,” Gibson said.

Held alongside the derby is an afternoon of fun at the Ducks in a Row Carnival. “We have games and inflatables, and the carnival games have prizes,” Gibson said. “It is several hours of activities for families to come out and enjoy. We have a Best Dressed Duckling Contest, and we have a deejay, so we have music and a dance. Five dollars gets you into the carnival and the Duck Derby. That’s a pretty good deal.”

CHOM also holds special celebrations throughout the year covering New Year’s Eve, Mardi Gras, Halloween and more. St. Patrick’s Day is a spirited event where children try to uncover hidden leprechauns and shamrocks. Easter egg hunts are carefully planned to establish separate areas

for very young children so they need not compete with faster, older kids. Many of the special events are celebrated two or three times, both through the week as well as on Friday nights and Saturdays.

Lego camps were offered for the first time last year, and they were an instant hit. The camps are back on the schedule with the first one to be held during Spring Break (March 24 - 28) and the others to run in the summer.

With so many programs and activities, and only a small full-time staff, CHOM depends on volunteers to keep the busy days flowing smoothly. Sherie Giles is in charge of volunteers, and the museum invites both adults and teenagers to donate a little of their time.

Teenagers who participate in the summer intern program gain valuable work experience while having fun. Many of the teenage volunteers once played at CHOM and hold warm memories of those earlier times.

“I’ve had teenagers who came to work here in the summer who have told me that this was their absolute favorite thing when they were little,” Skinner said. “Things like that make you want to give your all, and I think everybody here feels that way about it.”

CHOM has won several awards including “Alabama Attraction of the Year” three years in a row and has landed on Nickelodeon’s “Parents’ Picks” as Best Family Museum and Best Day Camp. Each year 65,000 people come from all over the United States to partake of the museum’s numerous offerings. A dozen other countries are also represented on the visitors’ log.

“It reflects well on our community that we’ve taken



advantage of this wonderful idea, and that everybody continues to support it and make it better,” Gibson said. “That is why I came here, because I thought it was such an exciting place to be, and we haven’t lost that excitement. I have the generations now who came to CHOM as a young child, and now they are bringing their own children. And they are still excited, and they are still enthusiastic.

“You know when you walk in the door that this is a place where children can grow and learn and be safe,” Gibson said.

CHOM is located at 2213 University Blvd. in downtown Tuscaloosa. For more information call (205) 349- 4235 or go to [www.chomonline.org](http://www.chomonline.org). ■

*Margaret Clevenger's work has appeared in many newspapers and magazines including Alabama Heritage, Mississippi Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, and Southern Lady. She has a story, "Whistling Past the Graveyard" in the anthology Tuscaloosa Tales: Stories of Tuscaloosa and its People. She is a regular contributor to Jubilation.*

*Parents and children explore the Lil' Sprouts Farmers Market, top right, and Nautical Knots, a Parker Towing display addition.*

