As play is crucial for fostering children's creativity, social skills, and overall well-being, barriers that impede access to play environments must be conquered.

Creating Safe Environments for Children to Play and Learn

‖ **Play Africa**

Nelson Mandela, the South African anti-apartheid activist and politician, once said, "Our children are the rock on which our future will be built, our greatest asset as a nation. They will be the leaders of our country, the creators of our national wealth who care for and protect our people."

In Johannesburg, the iconic Constitution Hill, which used to be a former prison and is now home to South Africa's Constitutional Court, is home to Play Africa, the innovative children's museum whose mission is underpinned by the principles that Mandela cared about. This jewel is just 15 meters from what was once Nelson Mandela's prison cell. Play Africa has transformed this the site from one of humiliation, oppression, and fear into a joyful family playscape of discovery and learning.

Access to Quality Learning and Play

In 2014, visionary Gretchen Wilson-Prangley founded Play Africa as a means to address the inequalities and lack of high-quality experiences that affect the early development of children from birth to age 10.

To set the context, the results from the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) paint a dire picture: 81% of children are unable to read for meaning. Thus, the foundation children need to thrive and meet growth milestones is stifled, creating a ripple effect of disadvantage. Furthermore, a lot of children do not have access to safe spaces to play. Play Africa is trying to change this narrative by making holistic learning fun and accessible.

In a bold move to create safe environments where children can play, create, discover, and connect with one another, Play Africa created the first children's museum and education makerspace in Southern Africa. Operations began at Constitution Hill in 2017. At Play Africa, 21st-century, high-quality playful learning opportunities are available to everyone — from all walks of life and abilities.

Making a Difference Through Play

Play Africa aims to enhance children's problem-solving capacities and spark their imagination by making play an integral part of early learning and healthy development. Using a collaborative and human-centered approach, working alongside a multitude of stakeholders, Play Africa designs, creates, and facilitates innovative exhibits and programs centered around learning through play in an array of areas, such as STEM, Active Citizenship, Creative Arts, Educator Training, and Placemaking.

The contextual nature of Play Africa's innovations make them remarkable. For example, flagship exhibits and programs relevant to its location, which it shares with the Constitutional Court, reflect the theme of Children's Voices. This program introduces the concepts of democracy, the Constitution, and children's rights using a playful learning approach. Through dialogue with children as well as a facilitated courtroom exhibit, children can create scenarios and roleplay a court case. A voting exhibit introduces children to democracy and the election process.

Another exhibit and program, called Bridges of Peace, speaks to building a better future. Since 2019, over 5,000 children have learned about the principles of diversity, *ubuntu* (survival, solidarity, compassion, respect, and dignity), and empathy using dialogue and play. A caregiver from a partner organization shared her observation that the program improved children's engagement with each other and was a useful tool to address bullying in schools.

Maximizing the Impact

To date, Play Africa has developed or executed over 40 innovative exhibits and/or programs since its inception. What has really catapulted Play Africa's growth and impact over the years has been adoption of a unique operating model known as "A Children's Museum Without Walls."

After multiple meetings with principals and community leaders, especially in the inner city of Johannesburg, it became clear that a majority of schools in the city do not have access to play spaces. Play Africa then embarked on a mission to turn various public spaces into safe spaces for children. The realization that not all children and their families would be able to visit Play Africa was a catalyst to create pop-up museum experiences and programs in community centers, school halls, parks, community centers, and on inner-city rooftops.

Play Africa's impact is underpinned by the willingness to meet children where they are. Meaningful partnerships allow Play Africa to continue the mission in places it otherwise would not reach. With

the collaboration of such partnerships, Play Africa developed toolkits, curriculums, and support materials for families, school organizations, and individuals passionate about children and their development.

One of Play Africa's recent innovations with a significant impact, reaching over 15,000 children to date, is *I Am a Scientist*. This program promotes equitable access to science, using hands-on playful learning education. One of the "wow factor" elements of this innovation is a modular 340-square-meter temporary traveling exhibition; this unique, interactive learning experience can be set up in communities to ensure children have easy access.

The true impact lies in the long-lasting connections among children and families that develop. These connections culminate in improved well-being for children. Furthermore, the Play Africa team is trained to engage with children as they tap into self-directed learning and discovery. The goal is not to focus on providing theoretical understanding but rather to build the foundation that leaves children more curious and confident about expressing themselves as they develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Ms. Nthabi Fuyani, a regular visitor to Play Africa, notes: "The importance and value of Play Africa's work are more valuable in South Africa because it helps children learn major concepts through play, and it is instilled throughout their developmental milestones. My children have learned a lot about ice and water in science, the voting process, and farming through play, and as a result, they now have a small farm."

Disclosure Statement:
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Lessons Learned

Futhi Mbongwe, interim Managing Director at Play Africa, identified the following top three lessons from his journey with the organization:

· Build relationships with as many stakeholders as possible who share the same passion and interest in advancing the mission. Such relationships go a long way and are the cornerstone of growth, bringing in ambassadors and proponents of the work you do.

· Design innovations or interventions with the user in mind and constantly seek feedback to create more ownership from the community.

· Recognize that the success of an organization depends on the team and culture you build. At Play Africa, we realized early on that what makes our work impactful was not just the exhibits and programs we develop but also how we make each visitor's and partner's experience a memorable one, where they feel heard and seen.

From South Africa to the World

What has been clear for Play Africa from its inception is that its work is a social responsibility. South Africa, even after almost 30 years since the first democratic elections, is still healing from the effects of apartheid. Play Africa is playing its part to bridge barriers that still exist, from city space planning to challenges in public education. Play Africa also advocates for play and safe spaces for children. These efforts have inspired others working in children's development in the African continent and across the globe.

When founding Play Africa, Gretchen Wilson-Prangley set her sights on creating environments of learning and play for South African children that would be on par with what children in even the most well-resourced parts of the world experience. It is always humbling to host visitors from across the globe at Play Africa and see them leave with a sense of belonging. There is still a long road ahead for Play Africa to bring meaningful impact to more lives. However, the strides made have inspired other like-minded partners to scale the impact in their respective communities.

Benefits of Makerspaces

Hands-On Learning: Makerspaces emphasize learning by doing. Participants engage in hands-on activities, which can include building, crafting, coding, and experimenting. This kinesthetic approach helps individuals better understand and retain information.

Creativity and Innovation: Makerspaces foster creativity by providing a space where individuals can explore their ideas without fear of failure. This encourages innovative thinking and problem-solving, as participants are free to experiment and iterate on their projects.

Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration: Makerspaces often bring together people with diverse skills and backgrounds. This interdisciplinary environment encourages collaboration and the exchange of ideas between individuals with different expertise, leading to a more holistic approach to problem-solving.

Access to Tools and Technologies: Makerspaces typically offer access to a wide range of tools, equipment, and technologies that individuals may not have at home or in a traditional classroom setting. This exposure allows learners to experiment with new technologies and gain practical, hands-on experience.

Project-Based Learning: Makerspaces focus on project-based learning, where individuals work on real-world projects that are often relevant to their interests. This approach makes learning more meaningful and applicable, as participants can see the direct impact of their efforts.

Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving: Through the process of creating and building in makerspaces, individuals encounter challenges and problems that require critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This helps develop resilience and a growth mindset as learners overcome obstacles in their projects.

Community Building: Makerspaces create a sense of community among participants. Sharing ideas, collaborating on projects, and providing feedback all contribute to a supportive learning environment. This community aspect can enhance the overall learning experience.

Open-Ended Exploration: Makerspaces often allow for open-ended exploration, enabling individuals to follow their own interests and curiosities. This self-directed learning approach fosters a sense of autonomy and motivation.

Integration of Technology and Art: Makerspaces often combine technology and artistic elements, providing a space where STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and STEAM (STEM + arts) concepts can coexist. This integration allows for a well-rounded learning experience.

Life Skills Development: Beyond technical skills, makerspaces help develop important life skills, such as communication, teamwork, time management, and project planning. These skills are valuable in both educational and professional contexts.