

# BUSINESS PROFILE

## C'Mon director brings lifelong passion for museums

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Joe Cox is a self-proclaimed museum geek.

Considering his upbringing in England, it's really no wonder why. With parents who filled his childhood free time with visits to the natural history museum, the science museum or one of the many other museums that surrounded their home, his fascination is understood. It is this affection that made Mr. Cox the perfect person to serve as executive director for the Children's Museum of Naples, a facility preparing to open in the fall of 2010.

Yet, Mr. Cox didn't grow up thinking he'd be a museum director. In fact, at one point he wanted to be a veterinarian — that is, until he interned at a veterinary hospital one summer. "I loved the 'All Creatures Great and Small' book, but the reality of a 100-pound pit bull having sutures was not my cup of tea," he chuckles.

After that experience, he considered environmental education as a career path, thinking it would be an ideal way to combine his love of teaching and his love of the environment. A bachelor's degree in environmental science from St. Mary's University College offered him a way to embrace all of his interests and still be out in the field educating children in an informal setting.

"If you think about it, the highlight of a kid's school year is field trips," he explained. "That one day will stick in

their head forever."

And that's exactly what Mr. Cox wanted — to make a significant impact on a child's life.

After graduation, an internship opportunity at the Conservancy of Southwest Florida inspired him to come to the United States. "I couldn't tell the difference between a mangrove and a manatee, but I fell in love with the hands-on environmental education," he says. It was during his time at the Conservancy that his old affection for museums resurfaced and he decided to pursue a master's in museum studies through a 20-hour-a-week distance learning program while working fulltime. "I believe it is important to decide what you want to be and then pursue your graduate education," he says.

After four years at the Conservancy, Mr. Cox was named the director of the organization's Nature Center and spent another four years with the hundreds of children who passed through the center, teaching them about nature and the environment. During his tenure, he received a fellowship from the Smithsonian Institution that afforded him the opportunity to spend one week a month, over the course of 18 months, in Washington, D.C., developing an educational program for children in museums.

"I was literally handed the keys to the Smithsonian," he says, noting that one day he'd be wandering through the National Zoo talking to kids about pandas and the next he'd be at the Museum of Natural History helping redesign the



Joe Cox

COURTESY PHOTO

wanted to help. It was soon thereafter that he was named executive director of C'Mon.

"One of the great things about this project is the passion of everyone involved," he says. Also exciting for him, is that the 30,000-square-foot facility will be a green building, in effect utilizing his passion for the environment.

One of the biggest factors that ultimately persuaded him to work with the C'Mon board was its members' commitment to creating a building and an experience that will be accessible to all children no matter their learning ability or their physical ability. Mr. Cox, who was born completely deaf in his left ear, knows firsthand how a disability can affect childhood experiences.

"It makes a huge difference in your life when you can't hear anything happening to the left of you," he says. Because of his own personal challenges, he is adamant that every child encounter the museum exactly the same way, an effort that everyone involved has taken to heart.

Construction of the museum, which will be in North Collier Regional Park on Livingston Road, has been underway since ground was broken back in January.

Mr. Cox believes C'Mon will change the lives of families who live here. "Ever since I moved to Naples, those who grew up here have said there was nothing to do (back then)," he says. "The next generation won't be able to say that." ■

mammoth exhibit. In the end, he created a treasure hunt program for children but took the traditional game one step further by asking the participants how each object relates to real life. He ended up implementing it at the Conservancy. A few years ago, when the Children's Museum of Naples' board started looking for land, Mr. Cox, who knew many of its members through their children,



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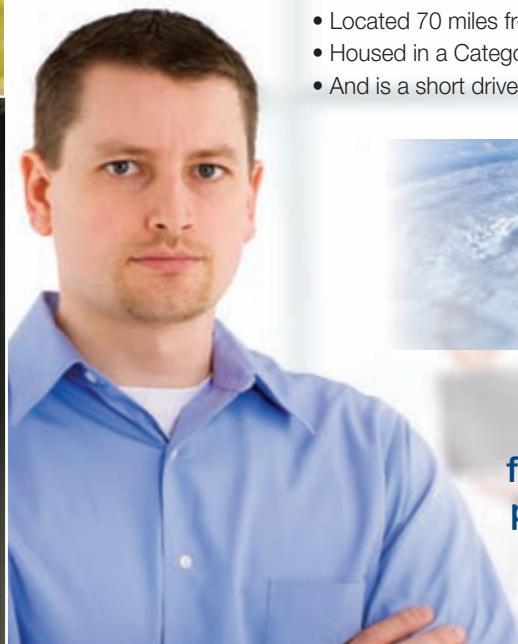
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