

# Ariens Company Museum hosts K-8 education night

By David Nordby  
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BRILLION – The Ariens Company Museum in Brillion is quickly becoming a go-to spot for area education and other community events.

The museum hosted ‘K-8 Education Open House Night’ last Thursday and welcomed teachers from nearby Brillion to other districts like De Pere.

“We have STEM stops that they’ll see along the way when they go to the museum,” Keith Polkinghorne, who is the museum’s curriculum developer and educator, said.

The museum has undergone major revamping the past half-decade. It now has a built-in education center for primarily K-8 students.

“Our learning center can accommodate up to 35 students and we have activities that we do in there with robotics, LEGO robotics, gear activities,” Polkinghorne said.



Keith Polkinghorne speaks during an open house at the Ariens Company Museum last Thursday afternoon. Polkinghorne and a group from Ariens Company have worked to turn the museum into a place for STEM education. (David Nordby/BN photo)

While the museum is also there to spotlight Ariens Company’s long and storied history, that is just one aspect of why people have gravitated toward the museum. STEM education is another.

“Really, our museum is set up on mechanical principals of outdoor power equipment, the mechanics behind it – gears, belts, pulleys, rockets – those types of things, and when they come into the learning center, they’ll be able to notice some of the other activities that we do enhancing the learning on the gear activities, but also some robotic things, too,” Polkinghorne said.

## Building the museum

Ann Stilp has been a leader in the museum project since the start. The building at 109 Calumet Street is nearly unrecognizable from 2017 when the company escalated efforts to use it.

“It’s being used in ways that we didn’t expect,” Stilp said.

In addition to a resource for education, it has also become a host to the Memory Café program in Calumet County. The Memory Café is designed for individuals with Alzheimer’s or other brain disorders to socialize.

“They find places to meet that people will ... feel comfortable with and all of the vintage exhibits in here – just like how music draws back memories – some of the farm equipment, especially for men, will draw back memories,” Stilp said.

The Memory Café is one event at the museum that Stilp had not foreseen years ago.

“So far, we’ve been able to balance everything. I don’t think anything has (been) a priority,” Stilp said.

Stilp and museum manager Bree Boettner have worked with the tourism committee to try to make the museum a destination. So far, so good. Bus tours and visitors come from around the state, with help from the museum’s feature on “Discover Wisconsin.”



Stilp said her favorite thing is when visitors say they are surprised and leave remarks like “I did not expect all of this.”

“We’re just trying to balance all those things – education, community events, company events, and we just get of traffic now, too,” Stilp said.

## Museums can do it all

Boettner has been the museum manager since last December but has been around museums for more than a decade. She earned a degree in anthropology and archaeology and then went back to school for an education in museums at Johns Hopkins

University in Baltimore. She has been around the country working with them since.

“Seeing the unique parts of human history,” Boettner said. “But the reason why I still love them is I love allowing and helping people find themselves in the museum, finding their human connections.”

In Detroit, Boettner spent six years with the Detroit Historical Society and developed a strong knowledge of the manufacturing industry. She brought all of her experience and knowledge with her and then walked into the Ariens Company Museum,



which made a big impression on her.

“I was absolutely blown away when I walked through this museum ... I just kept saying, ‘I can’t believe this is here,’” Boettner said.

Boettner said company museums are relatively unique. Major companies from Nike to Adidas to sports teams have started immortalizing their histories more regularly.

“Most companies had a company archive,” Boettner said. “Showcasing, again, the human interest in the story with how something is built, how a company is built has definitely gained popularity, I would say, in the last 10 to 15 years.”

Boettner says education fits right in with museums.

“I don’t think that’s anything new. I think that we’re evolving what that looks like going forward,” Boettner said. “Especially in the climate that we’re in with educators and our education system, I think that we can be a space to be partners to really move forward what education means.”

The Ariens Company Museum will continue to evolve, but with many reasons for community members to step foot in it.

“A lot of people make the assumption that it’s just the dates. It’s way more than that,” Boettner said.