



# A PLAYGROUND FOR MAKING FRIENDS AND MEMORIES

**S**uperior Funland is now in its third full year of operation and Desiree Hughes, co-owner in the venture along with her partner Paul Bothun, are looking forward to a busy fall and winter. The giant indoor playground is always bright, warm and dry when the weather turns to winter, and for parents in need of a place for their kids to burn off a little energy, Superior Funland is the premier place in the Twin Ports.

When parents walk into Funland, Hughes has that next door neighbor smile in her voice, and laughter in her conversation that is genuine and welcoming.

Hughes recently took some time to talk about Superior Funland, how it got started, and what they hope to do in the future. Like so many small business stories, it began simply, organically, spurred on by a desire to return home to Superior to raise their young family.

Hughes and Bothun are both from Superior, graduates of the Class of 2006, who found work away from Superior after high school. Some nights around the dinner table they would talk, jokingly at first, about moving back to Superior and what would it take to make that happen – how would they survive? Those little “what-ifs” began to slowly turn to action.

“We moved to Minneapolis back in 2019, and when we lived down there, we actually became members of an indoor playground. I thought it was just a genius idea,” Hughes said.

She lamented the fact that they would come up to visit family, and during the cold winter months or over the holidays, it was hard to find things for their toddler-age children to do.

“The Twin Cities did inspire us to try to come up with something unique, something of our own, that would help out the community, and give kids safe space, because another thing,” diverts Hughes in her enthusiasm, “... parks are wonderful, but sometimes it can get too cold. We just wanted somewhere safe and where parents can relax.”

Hughes explained how in the beginning they just talked about it, but things changed after the pandemic.

“We both had our careers, and when we decided to move back after COVID, we ended up just selling our home and saying, ‘Let’s go all in. Let’s try something new. Let’s give our daughters something we never had growing up. Let’s give Superior an indoor playground.’”

While it sounds easy in retrospect, Hughes says it was a hard decision. She was working as a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant), and Bothun was an industrial



**“IT’S A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR FAMILIES TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN WITH OVERALL PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS.”**

– DESIREE HUGHES, CO-OWNER - SUPERIOR FUNLAND





welder, a journeyman boilermaker. Even with two young children, and their careers, the desire to return to their roots persisted. "We're Spartans!" giggled Hughes in their defense.

"We decided that if we were going to move back, we'd take a little bit of our inspiration and bring it back to Superior. Call us crazy, but we were sitting in our kitchen when we lived in Minneapolis, and we were mocking up designs, coloring with our girls, asking them what they would like to see in a park if they built it, you know?" says Hughes. "They were a huge inspiration to us."

The concept of Superior Funland took shape at the kitchen table.

"I doodled it on a piece of paper in our kitchen. It is 'Superior Funland.' So, Superior; anybody wants to be superior, your business should be superior; Paul and I met in Superior, we have a history here, we grew up here. He wrote down Superior 'Play Land,' or something like that, and I said, 'Well, that doesn't sound fun, so we're going to do Superior Funland! I still have the poster that we drew before we made the decision, the original poster that we doodled that says Superior Funland.'"

Before they put their careers on hold, they did some research. They researched whether there were any other indoor playgrounds in Superior or the area; was there competition? They also dug into the product literature, "hype on equipment" is how Hughes refers to it, and of course, the costs. "We looked into all that. Once we sold our home, once we had a little bit of funds, we invested every dollar we had to purchase all the equipment."

Desiree and Paul put a lot of thought into what kind of playground they wanted to have, and for what age group. As parents of young children, they decided to focus on ages eight and under, toddlers, as their primary user group, and looked for appropriate indoor play equipment.

"We didn't go with anything used; everything was brand new. It's very time consuming to select and order the equipment."

Because indoor playground sets are custom made, it would take up to nine months, plus another one to three months for delivery. That gave Paul and Desiree a narrow window of time to find a space once the order was placed.

"So, we're like, OK, we'll buy it and then head to Superior and start looking for a place to lease." It seemed like a lot of time to begin with as they moved full speed ahead.

That year went past quickly, and when they were only three weeks from all the playground equipment being delivered they were facing a big problem.







"We could not find a space anywhere that would lease to us. We went to one location, and they kind of looked at us like we were crazy as we're saying, 'Yeah, we're gonna open an indoor playground.'" Hughes admits they were beginning to feel anxious. "We've got all this stuff this huge truck's gonna deliver, and we don't have a place," said Hughes. "We had our two young children along, they asked us a couple of questions and looked at us like we're crazy. I don't know why they didn't lease to us," laughs Hughes. "Maybe because we didn't know what we were doing? Honestly, we just knew we needed to find a place and get stuff set up, right?"

As time was running out, Hughes thought about the Mariner Mall (now leasing space as Mariner Business Center). The one-time shopping mall had fallen out of fashion but was centrally located.

She scheduled an appointment to look at some spaces with Dave, a sales representative for the property owners.

"Dave was amazing. We pulled out all our documentations to show him what we were having delivered in a few weeks and how much space we needed."

Dave immediately had a couple of spaces in mind, but the first one we saw needed a lot of work. The second stop was the site of the former Encore Record store, Suite 2, where the walls were already finished and it had a small lunch area. It was perfect.

"When we walked in here, basically it was all ready. There was not much that we needed to do when it came to painting the walls or installing the bathrooms and things like that. We got pretty lucky there."

When the trucks showed up, the couple set to work assembling the large pieces and laying out the playground space.

Dave, on behalf of the Mariner Business Center, was happy to welcome Superior Funland to their new home.

## AMENITIES AND ETIQUETTE

The centerpiece of the indoor playground is its large Ann Arbor Playground jungle gym. Desiree and Paul created the jungle gym using an online design app, selecting the colors and how the sections are configured.

"There's a lot behind it. You may see something similar, but it's not just something that comes off the shelf. It's manufactured. Everything is brand new," Hughes explained. "It has three slides, a tunnel, there are a couple drums and a ship's wheel, so they have that to play on."

The kangaroo jumper, which is a jumping pad, is another favorite. "It's a mix between a trampoline and a bounce house. This piece was created in Australia by a guy named Gary (Wakerley). He personally came and installed it for us! We were the first indoor playground in the state of Wisconsin to have it indoors. So, Gary, the actual creator of this piece, came and installed it. We got to meet him and his partner, so that was amazing," boasted Hughes. "He gave us a little history on this piece. It's actually safer than a trampoline and a bouncy house. It was designed for special needs children."

The kangaroo jumper doesn't have an age limit. "Each kid is different, and they learn and grow at different times. We never deny any child access at all, but because of our low ceilings, we try to prioritize time on the kangaroo jumper around the smaller children."







Superior Funland has recently added a couple of carousels, they have a sensory room, and they have several party rooms.

"It's a great place for kids to help celebrate their birthdays. We've done a ton of birthdays here. Kids can socialize during the winter months, not many people like to be outside when it's freezing out. It's a safe environment for families to help their children with overall physical development and social interactions."

It's recommended to schedule three to five weeks in advance to make sure to get the ideal time for your event. Hughes notes that everybody is asked to sign a liability waiver and respect the property.

Making Superior Funland accessible to all is one of the reasons they have a sensory room available for parents whose children may need a different experience or less stimulation.

"It's for everyone. I don't categorize," says Hughes. "It's just to help. It's just there. Whether it's to stimulate them and sometimes calm them down because it's off in another room, so when it's loud in the bigger area, they have another area to go into, and we have a sensory board, we've got sensory tiles, mirrors."

Guests at Superior Funland have access to a small cafeteria area for guests to use while the children are at play. Outside food and beverages are allowed and free wi-fi is available so adults can access their personal electronic devices. If you're craving something salty or sweet and didn't bring a snack, Superior Funland has a couple of vending machines to help tide you over. All they ask is for customers to clean up after themselves.

"If they don't, then we do our best to do it," laughs Hughes, "but the one thing I





always push is make sure that children, and the parents, everyone, washes their hands. Wash your hands as you come and go. It's huge. You don't want to get sick, or you don't want germs to spread, so wash your hands and use hand sanitizers."

Hughes has been a CNA for more than 10 years, working in nursing homes and hospitals. Cleaning and sanitizing are on her radar. "When it comes to cleanliness, if there is something that's dirty or something that spills, we always let our customers know, to





tell us and we'll be right there to clean it up, wipe it down."

## SPECIAL EVENTS

Fridays at Superior Funland are reserved for private bookings like family gatherings and birthday parties; events of 30 to 40 people and more.

"It's a great, positive environment, there's relaxation for the adults, a lot of engagement and fun for the kids. They're safe, there's only one way in and one way out, which we get a lot of compliments about because they don't have to worry about their kids getting lost or taking off," Hughes

notes. "It's a great gathering spot. It is a great playdate spot at the kangaroo jumper, and just having an indoor playground to help with their physical development. It's like a whole different world at times."

The team at Superior Funland likes to keep the space bright, upbeat and positive. This fall a new mural is going to be painted inside. Desiree says it will be a surprise, so, sorry folks, no scoop here.

On any given day, depending on the crowd, Paul will mix up the music to keep it fun. "It's kind of crazy; one day it'll be grandparents that are in, so he'll put on Elvis, but when we have the younger crowd that likes Taylor Swift, he'll play that. We

also have a TV that is set to monitor the video camera at Canal Park in Duluth, looking out into Lake Superior. That's cool. Every day is a different day, but at the end of the day our goal is for everybody to have a fun day, and a great time."

## WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Since opening their doors Superior Funland has found its business neighbors welcoming, and in a short amount of time, have developed several exciting partnerships. Every day during the summer the children attending the Sterling Silver Dance Studio get to spend an hour at Superior Funland.



"They can stay active. We have 7,000 square feet for the children to run. The Sterling Silver staff keep an eye on their children. They're wonderful. We've partnered with them since we opened."

Superior Funland, along with neighboring Guadalajara Mexican Restaurant, recently began offering a 20 percent discount with any catering order. "If a parent books a birthday party through Funland and they get the food catered from Guadalajara, they'll get a 20 percent discount off their order. They'll bring food over too, and my daughter loves their French fries," laughs Hughes.

The summertime operating hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and they are closed to the public on Fridays, which are reserved for private parties. In the fall and winter, hours will be 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., including weekends, with private parties on Fridays.

There are a few admission options for Superior Funland that parents can choose from. They offer a daily admission, weekly specials and punch cards, for instance, 10 visits gets you a percentage off, and they also offer a monthly membership, with a six-month commitment when you sign up.




Hughes is excited about a new collaboration with Douglas County. "We started working with Douglas County to help families who may not be able to afford the daily admission, to get more family memberships. That's something new to us."

Hughes and Bothun are happy being back in Superior. They encourage parents, grandparents, everyone interested, to stop in and see firsthand what makes this such a special place. It's a playground for making friends and memories.





"To see the smile on my children's faces, to know that I've been making great memories with them, with my family and for other families, is priceless when you see these kids smile for the first birthday party that they've ever had, for families that haven't seen each other for years. It's priceless. There's just some kind of feeling that is rewarding at the end of the day." 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.

