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Lindsey Brewer, of Saginaw, and her son, Andrew Alfano, 4, sculpt clay on a potting wheel as instructor Karen Hein of Midland helps at Space Studios in Midland Saturday. "I work at Independence Village in Midland and found out about the passports. I figured it would be something fun to do and it has kept him busy all day," Brewer said. "Be a Tourist in Your Town," organized by Midland Area Chamber of Commerce, is taking place through Sunday and encourages residents to increase their awareness of the importance of tourism and become familiar with attractions, events, activities.

Locals cash in on free opportunities to play tourist

By CATHY NELSON PRICE
of the Daily News

It didn't feel like a typical fall day, but the bountiful harvest was there all the same in an abundance of freebies from area attractions. Judging by the lines at many of the 21 venues participating in "Be a Tourist in Your Town," day one of the festivities, which continue today and conclude this afternoon, will be hard to top.

Sponsored by Midland Cogeneration Venture, the Midland Area Chamber of Commerce event is a free, two-day smorgasbord of things to do, eat, visit, play, tour, make and find. (For a complete listing of tour

destinations open today, visit www.midlandhappenings.com)

"Free" is the common thread, and probably was the biggest enticement for families to start out early Saturday morning, hit as many of the tour destinations as possible, and perhaps come back for more on Sunday.

That's what got Lesa Thrasher and her son, Curtis Laney, both of Midland, out and about, braving in some cases filled parking lots and long lines.

"We've already been to five places; the Farmer's Market, Dow Diamond, Grandma's Pumpkin Patch, Cold Stone Creamery and the Midland Mall," Thrasher said, displaying her

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stamped "Passport to Midland" while watching her son skate at the Midland Civic Arena's open skate.

"Because it's free, it's a wonderful opportunity for families to enjoy doing things together all around the town," Thrasher said. On the ice, Laney, 11, was refreshing his hockey moves during a few energetic laps around the arena. He'd put on shorts in the morning as the temperature rose above 80 degrees, Thrasher recalled, adding, "He thought he was going to be the only one here at the civic arena in shorts."

He needn't have worried. Of the skaters who were lined up to take the ice at the 5 p.m. opening, quite a few dressed the part of tourist, complete with baggy shorts, flowered shirts, sunglasses and cameras around the neck.

"They probably thought, 'It's a hot day; I know where there's ice,'" Laney said. He planned to return to the ice at the end of Sunday's tour. "I'm trying out for hockey and working on my defenseman skills," he said.

That's not unusual, said civic arena Zamboni driver Jim Hignite, who's seen quite a few youngsters (and oldsters) take advantage of the free and public skates.

"We had a good turnout last year for this same event, when the arena was still quite new. We get a lot of first-time skaters, but also those who have a passion for competitive sports like hockey, figure skating and, recently, speed skating," he said. Sunday's free skate runs from 3 to 4:45 p.m. (Midland Civic Arena, 405 Fast Ice Drive)

For Space Studios owner Stephen Space, the event marks an anniversary for the studio and art gallery.

"A year ago when we participated, we'd just opened;

we had still fresh paint on the walls," he recalled. "We had over 300 people through here; it really jump-started our business. Judging by how quickly we burned through the cider and doughnuts, it looks like the same kind of crowd this year," he said.

Once again, the big attraction is the potter's wheel, an irresistible lure for kids of all ages. "We have no concern," Space laughed. "This place is designed to be hosed down at the end of the day."

Lisa Bejma and her stepmother Debbie Bacus brought their children to the supervised mudfest. Bejma, originally from Sanford, now lives in Warren but got a kick out of "playing tourist" in her old hometown.

"Playing with mud is the best thing on the planet," Bejma said, as her son, Christopher, 7, intently focused on his masterpiece.

She and Bacus sat at a safe distance from the spattering clay, while Bacus's daughter Darby, 12, joined her sculpture to her nephew's.

"We have a pond out back, and (Darby) works with clay from there," Bacus said. "It's hard to get her away from there even when it's cold outside."

At the artists' table, Christopher Bejma announced, "I love this place," and declared his intention to preserve this particular work of art "forever and ever." Said his Aunt Darby, a Meridian Junior High student, "Clay is best because you can just shape it into anything; if you mess it up, you can start over."

Said her mother, "I forgot to ask if this mud washes out!" It does.

The Space Studio open house continues today from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (16 N. Winding Dr., 3.5 miles west of Midland off M-20.)

Reporter Cathy Nelson Price can be reached at cnprice@mdn.net or (989) 839-4233.