

Shannon Family

It gives the children an opportunity to do things and to understand areas of art that I have basically no knowledge of. We cannot just do those things at home because I do not understand it and for them to be in a room where they see many different ways to do art and being able to participate in that is great. – Lauren Shannon

The Shannon family made their first visit to the Frist Center in January of 2007. Lauren and her husband, Steven, took their oldest daughter Ashley (at the time five years old), along with several friends who were visiting from Japan, as it was “always on the list to do.” Lauren explained that it was during that visit that she started thinking about how as a child she grew up in a family that did not have a lot of knowledge about or appreciation for art and how she wanted something different for her own children. On that same visit, Lauren and Steven bought a family membership to the museum. Now that the children are older—Ashley (8 years), Anna (7 years), and Caroline (4 years)—Lauren visits the museum with the children about once a month. Steven rarely visits with the rest of the family due to his work schedule.



Shannon Family (from left): Ashley, Caroline, Anna, and Lauren.

Lauren describes herself and her husband as being “fairly orderly” people who are neither “creative” nor “eclectic.” She also describes herself as a cautious person who is somewhat intimidated by things she cannot do well, such as making and talking about art. As a stay-at-home mother and homeschooling parent, Lauren spends much of her time nurturing her children and directing their development and learning. As a homeschooling family, the Shannons engage in many field-trip-oriented experiences, visiting places like science centers, zoos, and art museums. The family is also active in church activities.

Of the daughters, Lauren describes Anna as being the “creative one.” In an interview, Lauren said of Anna, “our middle daughter is very artsy and very out-of-the-box compared to us and you could see that at 18 months old, and I so wanted to direct it appropriately. Of the three, she is the one that will be the really creative one and will be the artist type someday.” Lauren also added that Ashley and Caroline benefit by “going along for the ride” and gaining exposure to the arts.

For this study, the mother and three daughters made three accompanied visits to the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. For their like-site visits, they chose to be accompanied on visits to the Nashville Zoo, the Adventure Science Center, and the Hands-On Science Center, Tullahoma.

Visits to the Frist Center for the Visual Arts Galleries

During their three visits to the Frist Center, the Shannon family followed the same visit pattern. Described by Lauren as the “mommy rule,” the family first views the exhibitions and then finishes in Martin ArtQuest. While in the galleries, Lauren reads the object labels and wall text

aloud. Ashley, Anna, and Caroline listen and often interject with questions about what they see. In general, the youngest, Caroline, tends to stay at Lauren's side and the two of them often hold hands as they walk through the galleries. The two older girls, Anna and Ashley, are more likely to split their time between listening to Lauren's explanations of the artworks and viewing the artwork independently. Many times during a visit, Ashley's and Anna's patterns in the galleries resemble a "boomerang," with the girls bouncing around to different artworks and different galleries, always returning to Lauren in the end. All of the children are very tactile in their approach to the artwork and consistently want to touch the objects on display. At certain points during the visit, the children do touch the artwork. On the third and final visit, a slightly different pattern emerges, where Anna and Ashley begin to read the wall text and Lauren follows up by asking the children to describe what they are seeing. When asked to describe this change, Lauren said: "As a parent I would like to think that me doing it for them has helped them realize that it is part of the visit to stop and read."

Visits to Martin ArtQuest

In Martin ArtQuest, the children tend to separate and run to various stations, rarely staying long at any one station. The children visit most, if not all, of the available stations during a given visit. At all times, Lauren keeps a watchful eye on the children. For the most part, Lauren works with one child for a while, and then another, and so on. Often, Lauren provides suggestions and support for the girls as they work at various stations—some of this support is solicited from the children, but Lauren initiates the majority of the interactions. When the girls work on an activity at the same station (usually Ashley and Anna), they tend to work well together and at times offer each other support. Usually, however, the girls work quietly and alone. Caroline, like in the galleries, most often stays near Lauren, singing and humming to herself as she works on different activities. When asked to describe her role while in Martin ArtQuest, Lauren said: "I try to just let them sit there and do what they are going to do... let them be the creative one instead of me saying 'why don't we paint a heart, or a tree.' It is more just trying to be there almost as a chaperone for them as opposed to directing it."

Visits to Like Sites

Their motivation/benefit for visiting the off-site venues was exposure to different areas of science that would reinforce areas of familiarity while learning something new. The interactive nature of each venue was appealing to the family. Lauren indicated that the hands-on, user-friendly nature of the like-site venues was appropriate for growing children of different ages and abilities. The children can learn incrementally, without pressure, and in their own time.

The family was quite free-form in how they responded to and used each space. The children were high energy and touched almost everything they saw, remaining for a few seconds in some areas and a little longer in others. Lauren read and explained various activities to the children and, in most instances, the children continued to manipulate the interactive station while Lauren explained what to do. The children ran around in a space then came together with their mother, then went back out again.

Lauren noticed that not having floor staff available at the science museum was a challenge, as she had to work harder to encourage learning. She missed the "new voice" of another

adult to stimulate the children's learning, whereas in Martin ArtQuest there is the staff support to make the experience more meaningful and beneficial.

Motivation & Values

In talking about their motivation for visiting the Frist Center and Martin ArtQuest, other than the desire to provide opportunities for exposure to and to develop appreciation for the arts, Lauren also explained that Martin ArtQuest gives the children something to look forward to during the visit and that they are able to have fun there and have a more “cultured time.”

Lauren values the Frist Center experience because it allows the whole family to participate in the arts. She feels it helps break down barriers to the arts and encourages her children to experiment creatively and engage in independent thinking. For her, the exhibitions and the Martin ArtQuest experience, with the knowledgeable staff, help her compensate for her and her husband's gap in knowledge about art and art making. The understanding of and making of art is something she feels she can't do as well anywhere else. Lauren explains:

The exhibit showed a lot of different ways that art can be done and that is something I try to talk to them about. I don't have much of an art background and I want to expose them to the arts as a way of demonstrating that there is more than one way to present things, and as a result, there are lots of different opportunities to be creative in different ways—be it through music or different types of art like photography.

When asked what they enjoyed most about Martin ArtQuest, the children had different preferences. All of them look forward to the painting station and other art projects. The youngest daughter likes stacking the wooden blocks, and the oldest daughter enjoyed the animation station. Both parents enjoy watching their children create and explore new experiences, and they learn about their daughters by seeing what interests them. Says Lauren about one specific visit:

I really just enjoyed watching them play—doing something they have not done before—seeing them trace the medieval animals and trying to figure out what they were doing and understanding what that was all about.

When asked what they enjoyed most at the like sites, the children stated that they loved seeing the birds up close during a special program at the zoo. As Lauren noted, “They get more detail than on a normal visit.” Lauren also admitted to enjoying the bird program, learning where the birds live and the noises they make. At the Science Center the satellite disc and the game they played with it was something “totally new and different.” Lauren appreciated the Science Center exhibition where the children saw what too much sun exposure would do to their skin. She added that the girls now say “We need sunscreen because we do not want to look like the pictures in the Science Center.” In general, the family appreciated the like sites because the children could run around freely and touch things.

Shared Characteristics—Art Museum & Like Sites

As a homeschooling family, the Shannons appreciate museums, science centers, and zoos in very specific ways. Primarily, Lauren appreciates all of these sites because they assist her in

teaching. The exhibits and activities are an aid to her children's understanding and the experiences stimulate excitement and creativity in the learning area as well as provide opportunities to learn in different ways. As Lauren explained:

They learn something new every time they go to both spaces—gives them more conversation. They come home creative in certain areas and wanting to do things as a result of the visit. Hands-On helps them understand more and ties the topic of the day together because they have done something with the animal or the artwork.

The Shannon family also values these leisure-learning sites because they provide an opportunity for the whole family to spend quality time together and everyone finds something to enjoy. Having a range of age-appropriate activities is one of the key factors in their choice for what to do as a family. Finally, Lauren noted that a shared characteristic across the spaces was that the physical spaces were colorful and pleasant with a contemporary look. She appreciated it when activities and exhibits rotated so there was something new for the children to explore.

Lauren noted some important differences across the sites. The zoo, she observed, was both simpler and more structured than Martin ArtQuest, where her daughters have the freedom to choose what they want to do and for how long. At the zoo, the children are in a class setting and have to wait for their turn. Lauren elaborates: "The zoo is simpler and you don't get to be too artistic yourself. There is more a set way to do it and you only have a few tools."

Differences between the Science Center and Martin ArtQuest had to do with availability of staff in the interactive spaces. Apparently there was no interaction with staff at the Science Center. Consequently Lauren felt her children focused more in Martin ArtQuest because "people are there to help them and explain it, while at the Science Center the girls just run through to the next thing—they do not understand a lot of it and cannot read, so not having anyone there is difficult."

Connections & Effect of Participation in the Study

In thinking about the connections between visits to the Frist Center and the family's larger learning agenda, Lauren noted that they always do a journal of the places they visit a few days after the outing. The girls draw what they saw that day. Typically the girls will draw about some specific aspect of the experience but, interestingly, what they choose to draw is often not what they focused upon when they were at the site. Lauren feels it is important for them to "use their artistic expression and create whatever they want at home because the journals are a good history for them to have weeks or months later—it stimulates their memories."

At a Frist exhibition on medieval art, the girls found that their knowledge of Bible stories allowed for immediate connection. Lauren said, "that was neat because that was the first time there has been an exhibit where the girls could go from piece to piece and really get the message or understand what the art was about." That exhibition also helped them understand the relationship between the 3,000 year old stories from the Bible and art.

When asked if there were any effects from participating in the study, Lauren observed that she was much more intentional about where they would go for the like-site visits. After the first follow-up interview to the first accompanied visit, Lauren found that she thought about the questions she knew she would be asked on subsequent follow-up interviews. The benefit of this intentionality was, as Lauren expressed it:

Sometimes, as a mom, as soon as you do something you are onto the next project and next day's activities, and it has been good for me to kind of be forced to stop and think about what we did and focus on what that child really zeroed in on and to think about it even a little more than that day.

VISIT PATTERNS

	Frist Center for the Visual Arts	Like Sites
Average time spent	120 minutes (Entire visit) 71 minutes (Martin ArtQuest)	140 minutes
Timing of visits	Visit on weekdays after the children's afternoon naps, roughly 3-5 pm.	All visits were weekdays: first visit Friday mid-late afternoon; second Monday, and third Tuesday. Second and third visits took place from mid-morning to mid-afternoon.
Order of visits	On each visit, the family viewed art in the galleries first and then ended their visit in Martin ArtQuest.	The Science Center focused on being interactive and the zoo visit began with an interactive/teaching element followed by a more traditional zoo visit (looking at and talking about the animals they are viewing).

Snapshot

THREE VISITS TO THE FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

Visit 1



March 2009
2 hours 5 min.
Medieval Treasures

Visit 2



October 2009
2 hours
Chuck Close
Dean Byington

Visit 3



March 2010
1 hour 50 min.
Georgia O'Keeffe

THREE VISITS TO LIKE SITES

Nashville Zoo



April 2009
2 hours 30 min.

Adventure Science Center



October 2009
2 hours 30 min.

Hands-On Science Center, Tullahoma



November 2009
3 hours