

## McLeod Family

*Our philosophy on life is that learning is the way life is.* – Heather McLeod

Conner McLeod and his oldest daughter Ellen, first visited The Speed Art Museum in 2006. Wanting an alternative to the Louisville Science Center, Conner brought his daughter to The Speed as a result of his love for art museums. The two visited several times together before the rest of the family joined. Roughly a year and half later (in 2008), the McLeod family purchased a membership and have since become frequent visitors. For approximately one year, the family visited The Speed almost every week. Now Heather is most commonly the one who brings the four children, Ellen (10), Moira (8), Lochinvar (6), and Fergus (3) to The Speed. On occasion, Conner will join the rest of his family on a visit, as will friends of the family. The McLeods almost always visit The Speed in the mornings and then go out for lunch afterward.



McLeod Family (from left): Fergus, Heather, Ellen, Lochinvar, and Moira.

A stay-at-home mother and homeschooling parent, Heather describes herself as an “entrepreneur.” Conner is an engineer. Both agree that they “love art museums.” While the children create a lot of art at home, Heather says that Art Sparks is still one of their favorite places. Outside of the visits to the art museum, the McLeods also enjoy visiting places such as the Louisville Science Center and the Embroiderers’ Guild gallery. They also enjoy engaging in outdoor activities, such as taking walks through Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest or Jefferson Memorial Forest, participating in fossil digs at Falls of the Ohio State Park, or attending festivals. Heather says that outdoor activities are preferred when the weather is accommodating because the children need to have a “lot of running time.” Because of that need, Heather says that most of their indoor activities, like visiting The Speed and other museums, are reserved for days when the weather is bad.

For this study, the McLeod family made three accompanied visits to The Speed Art Museum and three visits to like sites, including the Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, Falls of the Ohio State Park, and the North American International Livestock Exposition. The McLeods did not adhere to a strict visitation pattern during the study. On the first visit to The Speed, they visited the permanent collection galleries and participated in an art-making activity. Art Sparks was closed due to flooding. On their second visit, they spent the majority of their time in Art Sparks, although they did make quick forays into the Sculpture Court and African Gallery. On the final visit, they visited the permanent collection and Art Sparks and were accompanied by a friend of Heather’s and her son. The three off-site visits followed a theme in that they all focused on the outdoors. Heather explained how she and her husband hope to instill in their

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children an appreciation for nature and its importance to human life. She explained, "I want them to really get the appreciation that most of history and most of time has not involved humans or even life." The McLeods frequently visit the Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest. At the time of the study, they were visiting the site once a month. An additional motivation for visiting the Falls of the Ohio State Park was to participate in the annual fossil dig. That visit was also a birthday choice by Ellen. The North American International Livestock Exposition is another event the family attends annually.

### **Visits to The Speed Art Museum**

While in the galleries, Heather and the four children moved from artwork to artwork with an organic fluidity. The children tended to stay close to Heather and the family almost always viewed artwork together. As a group, they spent time looking at and discussing the paintings and sculptures. During the discussions, the children pointed out what they were seeing in a particular painting and often asked questions. Heather always took careful consideration in providing thoughtful responses and explanations to the children's questions and encouraged deeper understanding of the works by encouraging the children to engage in directed looking and to seek out more information by reading labels. For example, Heather guided the children in looking at art by demonstrating how they could see more in abstract and impressionist paintings if they stepped away from the artwork. Another way Heather guided the children was by discussing how artists title artworks and what effect a title has on the viewer's interpretation of that piece. When the children talked about an artwork, Heather often encouraged them to "use their words." She also took time to define words and concepts, such as "savage," "abstract," and "anachronism." Visits to the galleries seemed to end when the children became restless and less focused on the artwork. This was evidenced when they began to move about the galleries in a less structured way. The youngest children would spin, skip, and run around, which did not seem to bother Heather, as she often encouraged them to "get their energy out."

### **Visits to Art Sparks**

While in Art Spark, the McLeods engaged in a variety of activities, including reading books, dancing in *Recollections*, building structures, and playing "dress up." The two dress-up activities, the *Dutch House* and the *Boat*, seemed to be favorites of the older children who divided their time equally between the two. The drawing activity, *Mirror Mirror*, was also used a few times by the children. Fergus, the youngest, enjoyed playing in the Native American teepee. In most instances, the older children (Ellen, Lochinvar, and Moira) played together or alone, while Heather stayed with Fergus, ensuring that he had something to do and was safe. Sometimes Heather took Fergus into Planet Preschool while the other children played together, alone, or with other children. From time to time, Heather socialized with other parents and staff, but she never left the children, especially Fergus, completely alone. All of the older children seemed very independent and tended to direct their own experiences without too much influence from Heather or each other. The children worked well together and the two older girls often helped their younger siblings as well as their mother when she needed to keep track of Fergus.

### **Visits to Like Sites**

While at the like-site venues, the McLeods engaged immediately in most activities they encountered. Naturally and intuitively, the family moved around the off-site spaces,

appearing not to miss the smallest detail of their environment. The children were inquisitive, appeared interested, and asked questions while demonstrating independent learning and support for each other's learning. While Ellen and Moira often worked closely together, for the most part the family operated as a whole unit while in these spaces. Heather was supportive and nurturing without seeming to push or direct the children into particular areas. Although the group appeared busy and frenetic, Heather's calmness offered an almost Zen-like quality to the group dynamic. Heather's longer conversations were triggered though memories generated by observing her environment. For example, during the visit to Falls of the Ohio State Park, she explained the history of a natural feature to the children through storytelling:

*It's called Moss Island because all different kinds of moss grow on it. It's by Little Falls New York, and it was always my mother's favorite place. She always said that fairies lived there more than anywhere else in the world.*

### **Motivation & Values**

Heather says that one of the greatest benefits of Art Sparks is that it accommodates children of a variety of ages and is also a confined space, which keeps her from worrying about one of the children wandering off. At the same time, she admits that while Art Sparks is "wonderful," the children engage in art-related activities frequently at other play spaces and most likely view the family gallery "just like another play space." She explained that for her the art making is not the most valuable aspect of Art Sparks, rather it is that it is a place where the children can have fun and "expend their energy after they have done more quiet stuff." Viewing the paintings and sculptures in the galleries is what Heather says her children value most about visiting The Speed:

*They love Art Sparks but it's more for the play value rather than the art value. I think they'd be terribly disappointed if Art Sparks wasn't at the end of the walk, but at the same time they really look forward to the art. They have certain paintings and certain pieces that are their favorites that they always have to stop and check.*

Without Art Sparks, Heather says they would still visit The Speed, but perhaps less frequently since they often visit Art Sparks when the weather is bad and the children need to expend some energy.

Confirming what researchers observed during the study, when asked what they enjoyed most about their visits to The Speed, the McLeods said one of their favorite activities was playing with the *Dutch House* and "pirate ship." Heather also said that she especially enjoyed pretending like she was a "pirate cat" that belonged to her pirate children, Lochinvar and Moira.

In looking at the like-site visits, part of Heather's motivation to take the children to the Arboretum and Research Forest was to expose her children to natural changes in the environment over an entire year. Having experienced a childhood living in what she calls, "wild spaces" and now living in a more urban area, Heather thinks it is important that the children understand and feel comfortable in the natural environment. Overall, Heather views the like-site venues as contexts that support and nurture creative play. She explained:

“imagination can take them pretty far, but the outside gives a chance to use their imagination and create their own world.”

### Shared Characteristics—Art Museum & Like Sites

Heather explained how the outdoor spaces were similar in value to Art Sparks in that both offer opportunities for creative play and are places where the children can use their imaginations: “They really give the children the chance to get into their imaginations and create their own worlds.”

### Connections & Effect of Participation in the Study

When asked whether they had done anything directly related to their experiences at The Speed following each visit, Heather could not think of anything specific. She explained how the children participate in art activities at home regularly, but she did not perceive those activities to be directly connected to The Speed visits. Looking back at the observations and impromptu conversations, however, data suggest that visits to The Speed did seem to fit within the family’s larger learning agenda in that the activities supported core family values, like free play and creativity; appreciation for art, nature, and culture; and better understanding of art and art-making skills.

## VISIT PATTERNS

	Speed Art Museum	Like Sites
<b>Average time spent</b>	79 minutes (Entire visit) 31 minutes (Art Sparks)	146 minutes
<b>Timing of visits</b>	All visits took place on Tuesday afternoons.	First and third visits took place on weekdays (Friday and Tuesday) and the second visit on a Saturday.
<b>Order of visits</b>	On the first visit, the McLeods only visited the galleries, stopping at the Sculpture Court, African Gallery, and English Renaissance Room. Art Sparks was closed at the time due to flooding. Before they left The Speed, they participated in an art-making activity that took place in the Sculpture Court. On their second visit, the McLeods spent the majority of their time in Art Sparks, although on the way down to the space they did stop and discuss some of the art on view in the Sculpture Court and African Gallery. On the final visit, the McLeods visited with a friend of Heather’s and her young son. They looked at a few pieces in the Sculpture Court, spending time playing with and investigating <i>The People Wall</i> (sculpture that encourages touching), before heading down to Art Sparks.	On the first visit, the mother and children visited the arboretum with Heather encouraging her children to look, touch and learn. The second visit included the father who was as attentive and supportive as Heather. For the third visit the father was not in attendance and the children’s learning was continued through the consistent support of mother.

## Snapshot

### THREE VISITS TO THE SPEED ART MUSEUM

#### Visit 1



September 2009  
2 hours

#### Visit 2

No photograph available

November 2009  
1 hour 20 min.

#### Visit 3



January 2010  
37 minutes

### THREE VISITS TO LIKE SITES

#### Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest



June 2009  
3 hours

#### Falls of the Ohio State Park



September 2009  
2 hours 10 min.

#### North American International Livestock



November 2009  
2 hours 9 min.