

FROM THE GUEST EDITORS



## Trans Narratives in Children's Museums

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### ABSTRACT

In 2015 *Mimi's Family: Photographs* by Matthew Clowney opened to the public at Boston Children's Museum. The first of its kind, this groundbreaking exhibit told the story of a family with a transgender grandparent through a series of large, color photographs. This case study describes the process, challenges, and outcomes of creating the exhibit and offers suggestions that all museums can use to create more welcoming spaces for transgender visitors and staff.

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Transgender stories are rarely told in museums, let alone in children's museums. While lesbian and gay causes have advanced significantly in the United States, transgender people continue to face systemic discrimination, harassment, and violence at alarming rates.<sup>1</sup> High-profile transgender advocates like Jazz Jennings and Gavin Grimm have helped bring issues facing transgender youth to the forefront but offering transgender-themed exhibits and programming for family audiences continues to be a challenge in the face of societal transphobia. As museums push to become more accessible and inclusive spaces, trans-inclusion must be a part of those efforts. This case study of a children's museum exhibit about a family with a transgender grandparent offers one approach to trans-inclusion in a museum setting and the positive effects transgender-inclusive efforts can have on the entire museum.

This article is co-authored by exhibit designer Margaret Middleton who conceived of and designed the exhibit, and Alicia Greene, Community Engagement Program Developer at Boston Children's Museum, who advised the exhibit development team, facilitated community partnerships, coordinated staff trainings, and ran parallel programming during the exhibit's run. As queer museum professionals, the exhibit and its accompanying programming were of personal importance to us both. We hoped our work would help transgender visitors feel seen and valued and inspire cisgender visitors to be allies.

### The exhibition

*Mimi's Family: Photography* by Matthew Clowney was inspired by Margaret Middleton's prior exhibit, *American Family*, a photography exhibit about a lesbian family created for Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose in 2012. When Middleton joined the staff at Boston Children's Museum, the museum wanted a Boston version of *American Family*. Since there was no pre-existing work to curate, there was an opportunity to choose a new focus. Instead of an exhibit about a lesbian family, Middleton decided the new

exhibit would be about a family with a transgender family member. Middleton sought out an openly transgender adult living in the Boston Metro area with a family with children that Boston Children's Museum's young visitors would find relatable. After a long search, Middleton connected with Erica Tobias. Erica lived in nearby Canton, doted on her grandkids, and most importantly was excited about being part of an exhibit with her family at a museum they loved.

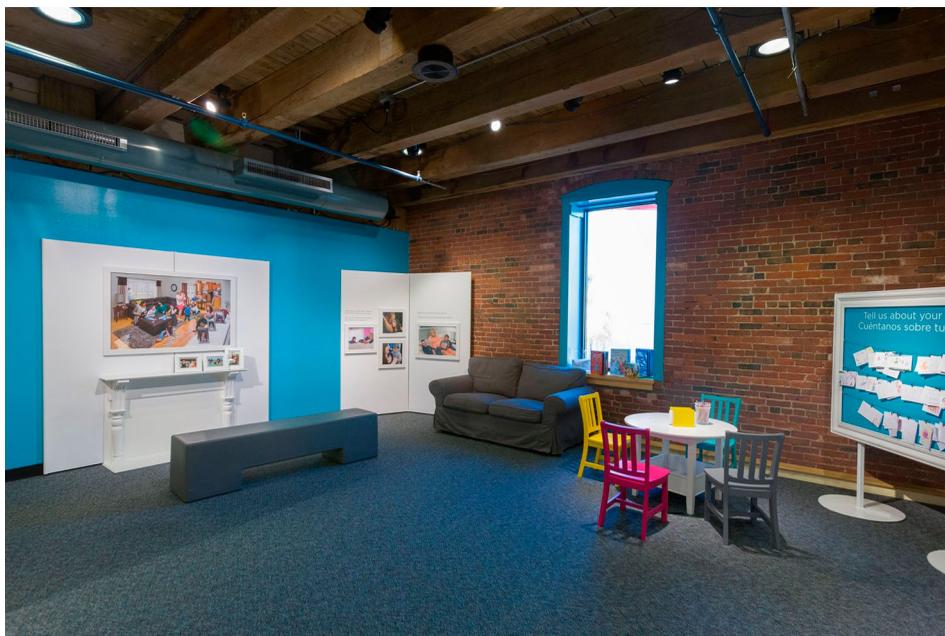
Middleton chose to work with Matthew Clowney, a photographer and professor at the Rhode Island School of Design who had an ongoing body of work focusing on families. Middleton and Clowney spent a weekend with the Tobias family, with Clowney capturing moments between the family members and Middleton recording interviews with them.

The result was a 500-square-foot traveling art exhibit that opened at Boston Children's Museum October 2016. Hung at child-height, Clowney's colorful reportage-style photographs depicted familiar, everyday moments like reading bedtime stories and eating ice cream (Figures 1 and 2). Said Clowney of the exhibit, "In one perspective, [the exhibit is] a recognition that we're all the same, that everyone is normal. But another perspective is that we're all special or unique. Both of those can be true."<sup>2</sup> Though Erica is the protagonist of the exhibit, the story was told through the perspective of her grandchildren as they eat, play, and relax together. Ranging in age from 2 years old to 11, her grandchildren were the same target age range for the museum and feature prominently in the pictures. Even the exhibit title, *Mimi's Family*, uses the moniker Erica's grandchildren gave her after she transitioned.

Grounded in the experiences of Erica's grandchildren, the exhibit demonstrated exactly how relevant the subject matter was for the museum's audience. This was especially important because museum leadership anticipated potential backlash from visitors or



**Figure 1.** The exhibit consisted of white folding exhibit walls softened by a few familiar, homey accents. Visitors entered the exhibit through a doorway styled like that of a typical neo-colonial New England house, complete with a welcome mat. Photograph by Matthew Clowney.



**Figure 2.** The artwork centered around an oversized grand portrait of the entire family displayed over a faux mantel, decorated with a couple of framed family snapshots. Nearby was a reading area with a comfortable couch and a selection of gender expression themed children’s books for families to enjoy together. Photograph by Matthew Clowney.

community members who felt that the transgender focus was not appropriate for children. Thankfully the museum received no such backlash.

To ensure the exhibit was as respectful and accurate as possible, all interpretive copy was reviewed by an external advisory team including educators and representatives from Boston-area LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) organizations like Mass Trans Political Coalition and Family Equality Council. Many of the advisers were transgender themselves.

Because we anticipated many adult visitors would need support in guiding their children through the exhibit, the interpretation began with introductory text that explained in child-friendly language what it meant that Erica was transgender. The remaining interpretation was sparse – photographs were accompanied by simple questions like “what are your family’s favorite stories?” and “how does your family play together?” As is customary for exhibits at Boston Children’s Museum, *Mimi’s Family* had bilingual interpretation. The translations needed to not only be accurate and respectful but also appropriate for the museum’s Spanish-speaking audience. For these reasons the team hired local genderqueer Latinx sexual health educator Aida Manduley to translate the exhibit.

The exhibit culminated in a sharing station where children and their families could draw or write their responses to the prompt, “Tell us about your family” (Figure 3). Visitors clipped their stories to wires mounted inside an oversized frame, creating a collaged family portrait that grew over time.

Two additional elements to support caregivers in the exhibit were a fact sheet and a note from the education staff. Created by the team especially for the exhibit, the fact



**Figure 3.** The sharing station had a child-sized table and chairs and a supply of colored pencils and cards for visitors to use to share their stories. Photograph by Matthew Clowney.

sheet was displayed in the reading corner and included a glossary, a list of resources, and recommended reading. On the wall of the exhibit was a note written by the education staff addressed to visitors about why they were proud to present the exhibit and how it aligned with the mission of the museum:

#### A Note from the Educators

Boston Children’s Museum is committed to helping children develop a strong foundation of knowledge and skills that can contribute to their ability to navigate a wide range of experience over time. We work to support an inclusive community across all of our exhibits and programs.

Within the safe and accessible context of a children’s museum, *Mimi’s Family* offers important opportunities for us to support our visitors who see themselves reflected in the exhibit and foster perspective taking, empathy, and understanding in developmentally appropriate ways.

Thank you for visiting. We hope you enjoy the exhibit.

These elements served to support staff members when visitors asked more in-depth questions about transgender issues or questioned the exhibit’s relevance to the museum. Additionally, the team developed an FAQ sheet for internal use with the answers to anticipated questions like “why did Boston Children’s Museum develop this exhibit?”, led a training for play guides who would be staffing the exhibit, and hired Tre’Andre Valentine, a trainer from Boston-based organization Network La Red to lead Trans 101 trainings, mandatory for all staff.

## Ripple effects

The exhibit and the trainings became a catalyst for amplifying conversations about inclusive changes needed in the museum. Inspired to make the museum more transgender-friendly and accommodating of nonbinary visitors, staff discussed visitor experience, evaluation, and security policies. Alicia Greene worked with the membership department to offer alternatives to gendered honorifics on forms. Because the honorific field is required in the software used by the museum, the team added the gender-inclusive Mx. to the list of options for members who may not use gendered honorifics like Mr or Ms.

*Mimi's Family* also inspired exhibits and programs. Art educator Alice Vogler worked with Boston-area genderqueer video artist Coloring Coorain in a later art gallery exhibit. Educators updated the museum's popular dress-up program "Dress to Express" with intentional support of children's experimentation with gender expression.

## Challenges

The first children's museum exhibit of its kind, Boston Children's Museum had nothing to guide the development of *Mimi's Family*. As a result, there were internal concerns about potential backlash from the public that slowed its development. Ultimately, museum leadership decided that the exhibit was in fact aligned with the mission of the museum and it was allowed to open to the public.

Trans 101 trainings like the one hosted by Boston Children's Museum are an important step, but while helpful in the short-term, "one-off" trainings don't provide sustained support to staff. Executive coach Steve Jacobs writes that

training alone isn't enough because it is merely an antecedent to behavior. Research has shown that antecedents can help trigger a behavior, but that the consequences that follow from a behavior are by far most pivotal in determining whether the behavior sticks in a meaningful way.<sup>3</sup>

For many educators, even just getting access to those trainings is challenging because educators across the country are hindered by local and state education laws that expressly forbid them from discussing gay and transgender issues in a positive light, if at all. These laws are commonly known as "no promo homo" and "don't say gay" laws and though they are specific to health/sexuality education, they are often applied more broadly. There are currently eight states that have these types of laws: Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and Utah. As an institution in Massachusetts, Boston Children's Museum was not subject to those laws, however the exhibit was installed prior to the passage of the Transgender Public Accommodations bill. The bill was signed into law in 2016 and now Massachusetts is 1 of 17 states that protect transgender people from discrimination in establishments that provide goods and services to the general public.

## Towards a more transgender-inclusive museum

Self-reflexive practice is essential for supporting transgender visitors and their families. Museum educators must educate themselves about gender identity and confront their own attitudes and biases. Staff trainings are a good start, but in order to make sustained

change, there are concrete, actionable things you can do. Here are several ways to make your museum a more welcoming place for people of all genders:

- *Representation:* even if your museum isn't ready to make an entire transgender-themed exhibit, there are other ways to include transgender representation. Use photographs of transgender people in exhibit signage and marketing and include transgender narratives in art and history exhibits.
- *Bathrooms:* many binary-identified transgender individuals just want to use the restroom that matches their gender identity. However, there are many reasons a transgender or gender nonconforming individual may not be comfortable or safe using a gender-segregated bathroom. Museums should offer accessible, all-gender bathrooms with explicitly welcoming signage for both the public and staff members (Figure 4). Make sure to mark public all-gender bathrooms clearly on the museum map.



**Figure 4.** The bathroom signage at the Orlando Science Center is accompanied by text that lets visitors know explicitly that people of all genders are welcome. Photograph by Margaret Middleton.

- *Forms*: update forms to accommodate nonbinary individuals. Do away with gendered honorifics or add the gender-neutral “Mx.” to the list of options. Think twice before asking a visitor to specify their gender on a form. Is that information truly necessary?
- *Inclusive language*: not everyone identifies as a man or woman, boy or girl. By using inclusive language like “welcome guests” instead of “welcome ladies and gentlemen” or “children” instead of “boys and girls” your museum can better include and welcome nonbinary individuals. Update public announcement scripts, email newsletters, marketing copy, and other public language to be more gender-inclusive. Refer to the GLAAD media guidelines (listed in resources) for appropriate and respectful ways to write and speak about LGBTQ individuals.
- *ID policy*: rethink policies regarding checking IDs. Aside from times when you are serving alcohol, it is very rare you would be legally required to ask for a visitor’s ID. Asking visitors for a government-issued ID card can be off-putting for undocumented visitors and visitors whose gender does not match the gender marker on their card.

Museums have an obligation to become more inclusive, welcoming places for transgender visitors and staff. Exhibits like *Mimi’s Family* demonstrate a commitment to including transgender narratives in the museum in a highly visible way. Some visitors who viewed the photographs saw themselves or their family members reflected back to them. For some visitors it was their first time getting to know a transgender person. Most importantly, this exhibit demonstrates to the field that transgender narratives do belong in museums and despite the challenges, working toward a more transgender-inclusive museum is meaningful and worthwhile.

## Resources

- HRC’s Welcoming Schools list of children’s books challenging gender limits: <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/books-looking-at-gender/>
- GLAAD Media Reference Guide <https://www.glaad.org/reference>
- GLSEN <https://glsen.org/>

## Notes

1. National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence*.
2. De La Cretaz, “What’s Life Like with a Transgender Grandmother?”
3. Jacobs, *The Behavior Breakthrough*.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## About the authors

*Margaret Middleton* is a Providence-based exhibit designer and museum consultant with a degree in industrial design from the Rhode Island School of Design. Middleton’s work has been featured in the American Alliance of Museums magazine *Museum* as well as *Exhibition*, the journal produced

by the National Association for Museum Exhibition. In 2014 Middleton created the Family Inclusive Language Chart.

*Alicia Greene* is the Community Engagement Program Developer at Boston Children's Museum. She has worked with nonprofit organizations for more than 20 years in community engagement, community organizing, performing arts and education. Alicia is an alumna of Kansas State University, American Academy of Dramatic Arts-NYC and Brown University's Arts Literacy Project. Ms Greene is also a member of the New England Consortium of Artist Educator Professionals.

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