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EXHIBIT CASE STUDY

Mimi's Family: one family's story of transition and unconditional love[†]

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the process of creating *Mimi's Family: Photography by Matthew Clowney*, a groundbreaking art exhibit for children and their families featuring photographs of a family with a transgender grandparent. Developed by Boston Children's Museum, the exhibit was designed to help trans families feel welcome in the museum and spark empathy in visitors who may not (to their knowledge) have transgender people in their lives. This topic is unique for a children's museum setting. Starting with a genuine collaboration between the artist and the family and continuing with the support of community partnerships, the exhibit development team created an accurate and respectful exhibit. *Mimi's Family* gives children and their families a safe and supportive way to talk about what it means to be transgender and what it means to be a family.

KEYWORDS

Museum; exhibit; children's museum; family; LGBTQ; transgender; gender; social justice; art; photography; community partners; traveling exhibit

When is an exhibit about a family eating ice cream, playing basketball, and reading bedtime stories considered groundbreaking (Figure 1)? When it is about a family with a grandparent who is openly transgender and they want to share their story with the world (Figure 2).

Mimi's Family: Photography by Matthew Clowney is an art exhibit for children developed by Boston Children's Museum. It features photographs that offer a window into the lives of transgender woman Erica Tobias and her children and grandchildren who affectionately call her "Mimi". Designed to travel, the exhibit debuted for one week in July at the Provincetown Public Library on Cape Cod and was reinstalled a few months later in the Gallery at the Children's Museum from 17 October to 13 December 2015 (Figure 3).

As the exhibit's designer, I worked closely with artist Matthew Clowney, as well as Erica, her children and grandchildren, to tell their story. I also worked with a talented team of exhibit developers and museum professionals at Boston Children's Museum led by director of exhibits Kate Marciniac and arts program manager Alice Vogler.

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Figure 1. Image from the exhibit *Mimi's Family*: Photography by Matthew Clowney.

Exhibit goals

I hoped the love portrayed in *Mimi's Family* would spark empathy in visitors as well as give children and their families a safe and supportive way to talk about what it means to be transgender and what it means to be a family. Positive depictions of trans folks are scarce and children (and adults) need what Laverne Cox calls “possibility models”. For children with transgender loved ones or for gender-nonconforming children, I wanted the exhibit to feel like an affirmation.



Figure 2. The entrance to *Mimi's Family* invites visitors in through a stylized door frame complete with welcome mat. Photo courtesy of Matthew Clowney.

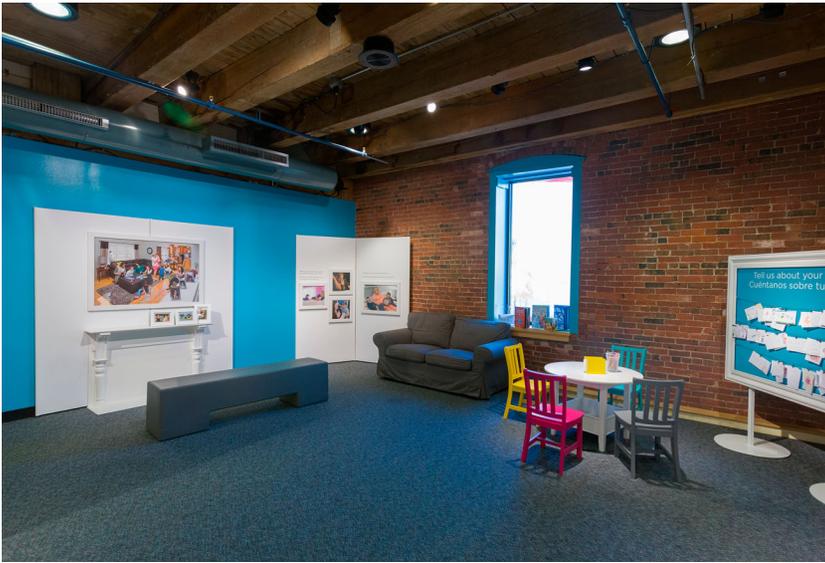


Figure 3. From left to right: the grand family portrait above a faux mantel; a book nook featuring children's books about family diversity and gender identity; and a sharing station where visitors can draw or write about their own families. Photo courtesy of Matthew Clowney.

It is estimated that only 9% of Americans know someone who is transgender (Jones, Cox, & Navarro-Rivers, 2013). Our hope was that visitors would feel like they got to know Erica and her family. When asked what her aspirations were for the exhibit, Erica said, "I'm sure that there are some children who walk through those doors that are having the same feelings that I have." And for those visitors who did not identify with Erica, we hoped they would see the importance of being a supportive family member and ally (Figures 4 and 5).

Challenges

There were some initial internal concerns about hosting an exhibit about a trans family, most of them about how visitors would respond. In the end, staff agreed that the exhibit was in keeping with the mission of the museum. And there was precedent; Boston Children's Museum has a long history of tackling big issues including death and racism. The museum even created a traveling exhibit in 1987 called *Families: A Celebration of Love, Diversity, and Commitment* that included a family with same-sex parents (Jenness, 1993). The exhibit traveled and one of the stops on its tour was the Field Museum in Chicago (Figure 6).

Exhibit development

Not wanting to perpetuate the harmful notion that there is one singular transgender experience, I specifically chose to feature a single family instead of several families.



Figure 4. Visitors enjoying *Mimi's Family* at Boston Children's Museum. Photo courtesy of Matthew Clowney.



Figure 5. The grand family portrait above the mantel includes all 11 family members featured in the exhibit. Matthew used a unique digital composite technique to collage together hundreds of photographs to show off the unique personalities of the family members. On the mantel are three snapshots from the family's personal photo albums. Photo courtesy of Matthew Clowney.

By making the exhibit a deeply personal window into the lives of a single family, the exhibit communicates to visitors that they are viewing one family's unique experience. And Matthew's reportage-style images strike that personal note beautifully by

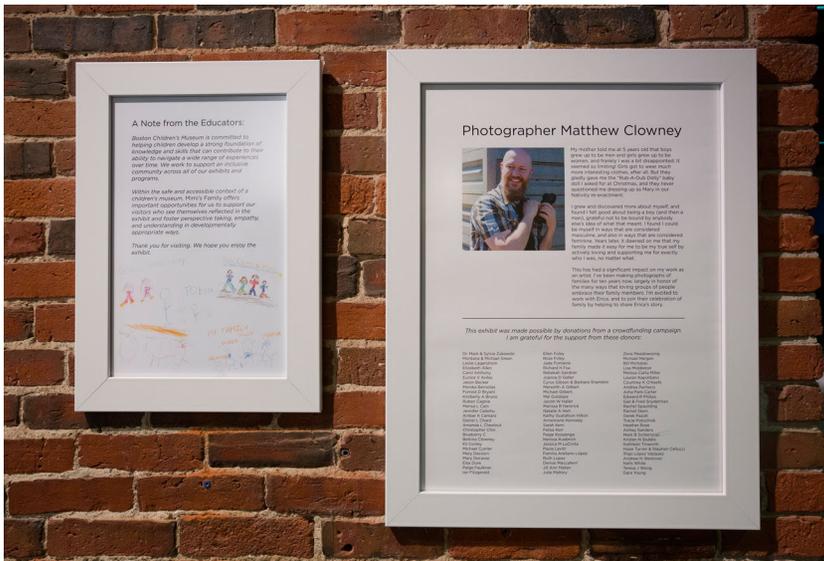


Figure 6. A note from the educators explaining how *Mimi's Family* aligns with the mission of the Boston Children's Museum and why it is important (left), and Matthew's artist statement accompanied by a list of donors to the exhibit's crowdfunding campaign (right). Photo courtesy of Matthew Clowney.

capturing moments between family members that showcase their relationships with one another.

Because dialog is so important to successful family learning, the exhibit development team wrote the interpretation in the form of questions to spark conversation between family members. Questions like, "What does it feel like to spend time with someone you love?" and "How does your family play together?" help keep visitors' dialog focused on their own experiences. This technique was effective in another exhibit I designed, *American Family* (http://www.exhibitfiles.org/american_family), featuring photographs by Courtney Coolidge of a lesbian family in Berkeley, California (Figure 7).

American Family also inspired our inclusion of a sharing station, another opportunity for visitors to reflect on their own families' unique qualities. The sharing station consists of a child-sized table and chairs and a display space. Visitors can use provided colored pencils and paper to respond to the prompt, "Tell us about your family." Then they can display their responses for other visitors to see. For families who want to linger in the exhibit a little longer together, there is a cozy book nook with a loveseat and a basket full of child-appropriate fiction and non-fiction books about family diversity and gender expression.

Partners

To ensure the exhibit was as accurate and respectful as possible, I worked with a group of advisers from local organizations including Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition,



Figure 7. The sharing station asks visitors to, “Tell us about your family”. Photo courtesy of Matthew Clowney.

GLAD, and Family Equality Council. The adviser group reviewed all exhibit text. Additionally, I worked with vice president Leslie Swartz and educator Jessie Kravette to create a handout that we made available in the exhibit with a list of resources and a glossary of terms.

Alicia Greene, community engagement and culture coordinator, was diligent about contacting local queer organizations about the exhibit and connected the museum with an educator from local social justice organization The Network/La Red to conduct a Trans 101 cultural competence training. This training was so popular the museum hired the educator to come back for staff who missed it.

What we could have done better

The family I chose to feature in the exhibit is white. In a time and place where representation of people of color is sorely lacking in museums and the media at large, this is problematic.

The set of criteria I chose for our potential photography subject was very narrow. I wanted a Boston-local transgender person who was enthusiastic about being photographed and being identified publicly as transgender. To help connect with our young visitors, I also chose to prioritize someone who had a loving family with children (Figures 8 and 9).

The fact that it was easier for me to find a more privileged woman to feature is not surprising. Trans women of color face discrimination and violence at appalling rates. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, “Trans women of color ... are almost certainly the group most victimized by hate violence in America” (Terry, 2015). Because of this, I prioritized hiring a trans person of color to conduct the Trans 101 staff training and hired a genderqueer Latinx (Reichard, 2015) educator for the Spanish translations (Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 8. The story of Erica's gender identity and transition is told simply on these introductory panels in just a few sentences. On the rest of the panels, the photographs are accompanied only by questions, asking visitors to reflect on their own families and experiences. Photo courtesy of Matthew Clowney.



Figure 9. Sadly, not all transgender women enjoy such close family relationships post-transition as Erica does. Photo courtesy of Matthew Clowney.

Conclusion

Mimi's Family has been one of my favorite exhibits to be a part of. The exhibit is simple and beautiful and tells a story that is very rarely told in museums, especially children's



Figure 10. Bilingual wall text asks visitors questions like, “What does it feel like to spend time with someone you love?” and “What are your family’s favorite stories?”.



Figure 11. Artist Matthew Clowney with Erica Tobias at the gallery opening for the exhibit’s debut at the Provincetown Public Library on Cape Cod.

museums. I hope that its success inspires museums to take risks and lift up narratives that have long been marginalized in dominant culture.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Margaret Middleton is a freelance exhibition designer in the Boston, MA, area. She specializes in exhibitions for multigenerational audiences that tell compelling stories in beautiful, memorable ways.

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