

Guest Post: Megan McQuillen reviews the National First Ladies Library's exhibit "Heroes of the Presidential Medal of Freedom"

Megan McQuillen contributes the third essay in a series of four guest blog posts written by the students in my Exhibition Development and Design class at Walsh University. This semester my students are learning about the elements and principles museums employ in creating successful exhibits and valuable visitor experiences. Each student is presenting her own perspective on an exhibit, book, or experience, which she found compelling.



Megan McQuillen, shown here with the design board she produced as part of her final exhibit project, is a senior in the Museum Studies Program at Walsh University.

A Review of "Heroes of the Presidential Medal of Freedom" at the National First Ladies Library

On November 12, I had the opportunity to visit the newest exhibit at the National First Ladies Library (NFLL), "Heroes of the Presidential Medal of Freedom." The exhibit had just opened on November 11 and would be featuring fourteen female recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, including four First Ladies. I have visited the NFLL many times and had a basic idea of how the exhibit would be laid out, but my expectations for the kinds of objects on display, and how they would be displayed were very high.



President Bill Clinton, First Lady Rosalyn Carter, and President Jimmy Carter
Image courtesy of the William J. Clinton Presidential Library

I arrived for my tour a little early and had the chance to watch a video put together by the NFLL's education department about the exhibit. The video outlined the women featured in the exhibit and what they did to earn the Medal of Freedom. The video also gave a brief history of the medal and the qualifications necessary to receive it. This information was very helpful for visitors who may have never heard of the Medal of Freedom, but also for guests, like myself, who had heard of it, but did not know very much about it. The rest of the video I was not too fond of though. It went into much detail about each of the recipients featured in the exhibit, giving information that would later be repeated in the tour, or that was available in the exhibit program. Another downside to the video is that it is only played for guests who arrive early enough to see it. If visitors come with only enough time to see the exhibit, they will not get the opportunity to learn about the history of the medal and the qualifications for receiving it.

The tour started promptly at 1:30 and was given by one of the NFLL's many trained docents. She opened up by explaining a history of the building and how the NFLL came to be, and then took the visitors around to explain about the items in each of the cases. As mentioned, my expectations were to see all kinds of objects, which had once belonged to the recipients, but instead I saw a lot of dresses and plaques. As I walked around it seemed that everything on display was either a plaque that was given to one of the women for her work with a particular cause, or a nice dress worn by one of the women.



Betty Ford, Image Courtesy Ford Presidential Library

One particular example of this was the items on display belonging to former First Lady Betty Ford. For her support of the Equal Rights Amendment, her raising awareness of breast cancer (she suffered from it and would be one of the first women to ever openly speak out about it), as well as her help in starting the Betty Ford Clinic to help women receive treatment for alcohol and substance abuse problems, she was awarded a Medal of Freedom in 1991. Items of hers on display included plaques recognizing her many achievements as a supporter of the ERA and for breast cancer awareness, but also included a pink and white gown she wore for a state dinner. The gown was certainly beautiful, but it seemed to have

almost nothing to do with the exhibit itself other than giving visitors a glimpse of Mrs. Ford's fashion sense.

After our docent explained about the exhibit, I had some time to browse on my own and look more closely at each object. Posted around the gallery were pictures of each of the featured women with the reasons why they were chosen to receive a Medal of Freedom, and excerpts from the speech given by the President at their award ceremony. I found this particularly interesting and helpful. These excerpts gave the Presidents' perspective on the many achievements made by these women and how they will continue to affect Americans in the future. Eunice Kennedy Shriver was one of these women. Her work on behalf of the developmentally challenged allowed them to receive more help and acceptance in society. She would also help establish the Special Olympics, which that today gives mentally challenged children and adults the same competitive opportunities as everyone else.

As I continued to browse through the exhibit, I was a little disappointed, but at the same time impressed, by the signage on the objects. Most of the signage posted gave information on the year an object or dress was made, who made it, and to whom it once belonged. I thought that some of the signs could have elaborated more, giving additional information, but at the same time, I was impressed because the information was enough for visitors to glance and read and move on. The brief labels kept human traffic from getting jammed up around some objects, and if visitors had more questions, they could certainly ask the docent who would answer them, or ask someone else at the museum for the answer.

The layout of the exhibit was particularly nice and very accommodating. The NFLL's Education and Research Center's exhibit gallery is fairly small and has five permanent display cases that were made specifically for them. The cases are each large enough to fit several of the objects and dresses in each. Because of their size, it could be very easy to "overstuff" the case with items to see, but this was definitely not the case. Each case was filled with enough items to allow visitors plenty of room to see everything without feeling overcrowded and without missing objects because they were hidden from view. The layout of these cases also provided plenty of room for visitors who may be confined by wheelchairs, walkers or strollers to see everything on display without interrupting others' experiences.

Altogether, I thought the exhibit was excellent. It contained enough information through the video, the program, and/or the docent that all the visitors would be well informed and educated on the importance of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the women who received it. While I was disappointed by some of the random objects on display, they still contributed to an overall good experience for me and other visitors like me, who enjoy seeing gowns and how styles have changed over the years. I think my favorite part of the entire exhibit was a love letter from "Secret Agent 33" (aka Ronald Reagan) to his wife Nancy that told her how much he missed her and asked her to "lock herself in the closet" and he would let her out when he got home. While this seemed to be one of those random objects, it was cute for all the hopeless romantics out there, and also made the Reagans seem more human and less of a political couple, as they and

other First couples are so often depicted. Most importantly though, I think the National First Ladies Library did an excellent job of exhibiting important women in American history who beat the odds and worked hard to prove that as women they could make a difference in the world.



The National First Ladies Library is located in Canton, Ohio at 205 and 331 Market Ave. South. The Education and Research Center is located in an 1895 bank building and serves as the main office, archives and library of the NFLL. It also has an exhibition hall, which displays temporary exhibits rotating about every six months. "Heroes of the Presidential Medal of Freedom will be on display until September 9, 2011. Visitors begin their tour in the Education and Research Center where they receive guided tours by trained docents on the current exhibits. After about a half hour in the Education and Research Center, visitors are taken to the Saxton-McKinley home, located one block south of the Education and Research Center. In the Saxton-McKinley home, guests are greeted by a docent dressed as one of the First Ladies and given a tour. The house was the family home of former First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley, built by her maternal grandparents in the 1840s. The Victorian mansion would also serve as the McKinleys' home for about 28 years, while William McKinley served in Congress.

Visitors may take guided tours of the National First Ladies Library Tuesday through Saturday between 9 am and 4 pm. The museum is also open on Sundays from June-August. For more information, or to book a tour, interested visitors can call 330-452-0876 or visit their website www.firstladies.org.