

The history of the Dollhouse Room

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As we continue to look at the history of the exhibits in the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, a favorite of many children is the Dollhouse Room. This exhibit was designed in 1995 by Margaret Allard. It opened in 1997. The rest is history, so to speak. The children love the room!

Two of mine and Fanny's five grandchildren insist on visiting the Children's Museum at least once during any time they stay with us. These are the two youngest grandkids and the very youngest is a girl. She is the only girl in our family of two sons, four grandsons and finally in the last grandchild of our family, we at last had a girl.

Of course she rules the family. All the boys are quick to be sure Kate gets what she wants, regardless. Of course, her Papaw leads the pack in catering to her every whim. So, when she says, "Papaw, I want to go to the Dollhouse Room in the museum, I get ready to take her right away."

Many of you likely share much the same experiences when your children or grandchildren visit this well designed exhibit suited in size to a child's world. The chairs, tables, doors and everything else is scaled to fit children.

What really has been done is to build everything to about $\frac{3}{4}$ life-size, which is the perfect scale for young children. They can easily sit in the chairs (and their feet actually touch the floor!) Can you imagine what frustration children must feel... in our "adult-sized" world, nothing fits!

Well, here in the Dollhouse, parents sit and watch from the back seating area while the children are encouraged to enter through the front door (with a doorbell). Once inside they immediately begin to role play in a realistic house just their size. This happens automatically and without thinking, it is just a natural and wholesome reaction to the setting. This is amazing to watch. It happens every single time a child enters.

Often when they exit the Dollhouse they no longer act the role, but upon returning to the inside the role play very often resumes immediately. The kitchen seems to produce the most marked reaction in my granddaughter. She enjoys taking items from the refrigerator and role playing at using the sink and stove. Of course, she brings me the food she has "prepared."

The rooms of the Dollhouse consist of a kitchen, living room, two bedrooms and a bathroom. The furnishings in these rooms are sized to fit and are arranged realistically with room for the children to actually use the furniture.

The dolls in the Dollhouse are the original fifteen year old dolls, so they have been tended by many children over the years. They wear "preemie-sized" clothes and the rotate being on duty in the Dollhouse or being in the "doll hospital" for repairs.

While the Dollhouse has existed for 15 years now, updates, many repairs and even some changes have been made, the basic house remains the same as originally designed. It is a highly successful arrangement that works well and is exciting for children. The enticement to role playing works and children have fun there.

In 2007, Margaret replaced the old exhibit cases with a new display called, "The Century Toy Store." Margaret said of this exhibit area, "It is built to look like an old toy store, is where we display hundreds of

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20th century American toys and dolls in chronological order. We also have a beautiful large dollhouse 'mansion' in the display and a large Ferris Wheel on display there."

The Ferris Wheel is on loan from the Grey Goose Antiques in Clinton. The seats on the big wheel are occupied by Madame Alexander dolls that were donated by Elizabeth Richardson.

Margaret continued, "Our artifacts are mostly donated with a few exceptions where an item was particularly needed such as our 1930's Shirley Temple doll. I had wanted one of those for years and finally found one at Larry Wyrick's Antiques."

Margaret has also added a series of display cases in the hallway outside the Dollhouse Room. In these neat and orderly displays along the wall are collections of toys, dolls and other childhood items that are kept on display. They serve as an attraction to the Dollhouse Room and give a preview of what is to come once inside the room.

As has been said about other exhibits in the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, this one also was built because someone had an idea and a passion to make it happen. Margaret Allard is the champion of the Dollhouse Room. She has spent untold hours thinking the design through and building the exhibit, with help from many others, I am sure, but her ideas and influence can be seen throughout the exhibit.

As Gordon Fee, long time member of the board of directors for the museum, has said, "This saga [creative idea, design, fabrication and maintenance of exhibits] is just a repeat of many other stories of how exhibits come to be at the Museum...there has never been a single exhibit built by a professional museum exhibit construction firm. Everything is a labor of love by one or more people."

This is certainly true of the Dollhouse Room.



boy looks in cabinet, girl feeds doll and boy sets at table, all just the right size and in the most exciting room of the Dollhouse, the kitchen

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girl, boy and boy stand at the entrance to the Century Toy Store