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INTRO MUSIC

Children: Owl Moon, owl moon!

Sam: One of my earliest memories of the Peabody Essex Museum is the owls in the Art & Nature exhibit. I think I was about two years old. I listened and listened to the recording of Jane Yolen’s *Owl Moon*. One day, I thought my baby sister said owl moon, so I started calling her ‘Owl Moon.’

Annabelle: He called me ‘Owl Moon’ all the time. So, I started calling him ‘Owl Moon.’

Sam: A few years after all of that, my dad made this recording. Listen.

Recording:

[CHILD VOICE MAKING NOISES]

Todd: So, Annabelle, you used to call Sam ‘Owl Moon,’ do you remember?

Annabelle: Owl moon.

Todd: Yeah, and Sam, you used to go to Annabelle’s crib...

Sam: Owl moon. Owl moon!

Annabelle: Owl moon!

Todd: That’s right. Annabelle remembers.

Sam and Annabelle: You’re owl moon. Yeah. Owl moon!

Todd: [LAUGHTER] Do you guys remember that?

Both children: Owl moon.

Host, Chip Van Dyke: Welcome to the PEMcast, conversations and stories for the culturally curious. This is episode three. My name is Chip; I am the resident video guy here at the Peabody Essex Museum. And with me is—

Host, Dinah Cardin: Dinah Cardin, special projects writer here at the museum.

Chip: The piece you heard at the top of the show is called ‘Owl Moon.’ It was performed and produced by long-time Salem resident Todd Wemmer and his two children.

Dinah: Todd is a friend and listener of the podcast.

Chip: He’s also been a sort of podcast spiritual advisor to us. He’s been with Dinah and I since episode one, and he’s been encouraging us to explore the medium. And as a result, uh, he’s encouraged Dinah to head out to Chicago for Third Coast International Audio Festival this year.
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Dinah: That’s right. The festival is in Chicago, it’s in November, and I’m looking forward to experiencing all things audio. Please, come find me, and let’s connect!

Chip: We’re really excited to hear what you have to say about that whole experience. But, back to Todd.

Dinah: Yes, Todd is a teacher of audio storytelling at Endicott College here locally, and ‘Owl Moon’ was inspired by one of his many visits to PEM with his children, Annabelle and Sam. Here’s Sam:

Sam: I was about three, and my sister was, I think, maybe two. Um, we came to the museum – our dad would bring us – and there was a little book section. So, we would go over to the book section, and there was a book called Owl Moon by Jane Yolen. It was about a girl and her dad who went looking for owls at night.

Chip: So, Todd has been taking his kids to the museum since they were babies. And as a result of him being this audio storytelling teacher and taking his kids to the museum, they have this wonderful sort of collaboration in this piece ‘Owl Moon.’ We asked Sam if he was at all interested in pursuing audio storytelling, and he said it wasn’t really where his interests lie, but his real interests lie in nature.

Sam: I’m more, like, interested in nature and stuff. I have a frog and I’m probably getting two more frogs, and I’m keeping a snake for two days. It’s a baby, it’s like that big, it’s a water snake. It’s about that thin. I caught it and I’m keeping it for just two days. We’re letting it go today.

Chip: We’re in the habit now of introducing the PEMcast as ‘conversations and stories for the culturally curious,’ but what does it mean to be ‘culturally curious?’ Today on the PEMcast, we’re exploring the topic of growing up curious.

Dinah: We’ll hear from Chris Wren and his daughter Georgia about their daily ritual, which includes frequent visits to PEM.

Chris: What did you say about the bee on the Common? When we saw the bee flying around.

Georgia: Thank you for pollinating.

Chris: You said thank you for pollinating.

Chip: And we’ll also hear from Dea Birkett, Director of Kids in Museums, about how she and her family were kicked out of a museum in London and how that led to dramatic change among British museums to become more family-friendly.

Dea: At that same moment, a room warden came up to me and said, uh, we had to leave because we were being far too noisy, and threw us out. Well, she threw out the wrong family.

Dinah: Lastly, we’ll hear from one of our favorite people here at the museum, Paula Richter.

Chip: Yeah, Paula shares with us this great story about when she was a teenager and went to this living history museum for summer camp, and how that led to her career path here at PEM.

Chris: Okay. Okay. So they’re going to ask us a bunch of questions, and we’re going to tell them all about our experience, okay?
Chip: Dinah. How would you describe Chris?

Dinah: Chris Wren is a vegan. He runs a hardcore record label. And he’s a dad.

Chris: Come on over. Do you want to sit on the chair right here?

Georgia: Yeah.

Dinah: Even though he’s a graduate of art school, he barely came to museums before his daughter was born.

Chris: I’ve lived in Salem for about twelve years, and I think I’d been to the Peabody Essex twice before I had Georgia. But now I’ve been here hundreds of times.

Georgia: I’m making a picture! Can you give me some paper?

Chris: Some of this?

Georgia: Yep.

Chris: The wax paper?

Georgia: The wax paper.

Dinah: Instead of putting their daughter in daycare, Chris and his wife Elizabeth take turns bringing her to PEM practically every morning.

Chris: We have our shifts. So, I have the AM, the morning shift. Go get coffee, come down to the museum, go to Common, all of our usual haunts. You know, there’s just such a sense of community.

Georgia: I’ve got this pink thing.

Chris: That’s an eraser.

Georgia: It’s an eraser.

Chris: Yeah.

Georgia: And I’ve got a pen, too.

Chris: Thankfully, I’ve, you know, been able to afford the time. Putting out punk and hardcore records, while exciting and gratifying, doesn’t necessarily pay the mortgage. So, I started a company called Sully’s that does sports novelties. You know, we sell mainly tee shirts to Boston sports fans. Georgia, were you, were you pretending to be Daddy recently and saying, ‘Get your tee shirts here?’

Georgia: Yeah.

Chris: Can you say that?
Georgia: Get your tee shirts here.

Chris: Get your tee shirts here!

Georgia: Get your tee shirts here!

Chris: Yeah!

Dinah: So, after all of these many visits to the museum and to all of these cultural offerings going on in the area, Georgia has now started her own at-home art gallery.

Chip: We should mention too that Georgia’s grandfather is a painter, also. A landscape painter.

Chris: She actually just said last week that she wants to contribute two paintings to his next exhibit.

Georgia: What’s this pink thing?

Chris: That’s an eraser, just like that. You can take the eraser and rub it on it, and it makes the— it makes the pencil lines go away. And now you can make them go away. [SOUND OF ERASER ON PAPER] Good job, babe.

Georgia: Ah, look at that! [GIGGLE] This ‘raser is my favorite.

Chris: Yeah.

Georgia: I did not know what it was.

Chris: I mean, why would we want to lose these moments, you know? She’s—I blinked and she’s three. I’m going to blink again and she’s gonna be ten. You know, some people say well maybe if she was in daycare she’d have more, you know, interaction with kids her age, and the reality is there’s plenty of kids that we see every day. Maybe she sees them once a week, but there’s somebody every day.

Georgia: Dad, I need the pencil and then erase it all.

Chris: Okay. Here’s a pencil, babe.

Dinah: [VOICED OVER CHRIS AND GEORGIA CONVERSATION IN BACKGROUND] In August, Georgia had her own lemonade stand in front of PEM during our monthly evening party series, PEM/PM.

Chris: See, it’s going away.

Dinah: In the application to the City of Salem for a permit, Chris sent a photo of Georgia’s old-school lemonade stand that he built, and wrote: “My daughter is active at the Peabody Essex Museum and she’s been invited to feature her stand at the next PEM/PM event,” as if the whole act of selling lemonade is one giant pop-up art piece.

Chris: For us, we’re blessed. We have the Peabody Essex Museum in our backyard. So, you know, coming here and being a member here is something that allows us to have...[GEORGIA SHAKING RATTLING INSTRUMENT IN BACKGROUND, LAUGHTER]...an early start in music.
Now, we go to London. Dea Birkett is a mother and a journalist who started Kids in Museums.

The idea for Kids in Museum started after one fateful trip Dea took with her family to the Royal Academy.

I was with my three children at the Royal Academy in London at the Aztec exhibition, and my son – he was almost three then, and he was strapped in his buggy so he wasn’t running around all over the place – saw the statue of Eagle Man, which has snake for hair and a big beak for a nose. And he shouted, ‘Monster! Monster!’ And I thought, this is fantastic! I have a three-year-old who appreciates pre-Hispanic art. So just as I was bending down to say to him, yes, it looks just like a monster, at that same moment a room warden came up to me and said we had to leave because we were being far too noisy, and threw us out. Well, uh, she threw out the wrong family. Two days later I wrote a piece in the Guardian about being thrown out of the Royal Academy, and by the end of that day I’d actually been contacted by over 500 other families saying that they were fed up how they’d been treated in museums and galleries, and they wanted something done about it.

You know, Dinah, I felt, like many people, that the terms family-friendly and kid-friendly were synonymous, but Dea explained the difference.

To be kid-friendly is relatively easy, because you can just decide the age of the kid, so you can say “5- to 12-year-olds” and just keep them happy. But in the meantime, and I’ve been there often as a parent, the parent or the adult that is with the child might be really bored and not engaged and involved and enjoying themselves at all. Just really watching their child enjoy themselves. The real trick is to be family-friendly – to involve and engage all of the family: the grandparents, the parents, the older cousin, the uncle, and the teenager, and the child. And that’s more tricky, but it’s not at all impossible, ‘cause all you have to do is layer it. You layer the experience so that everybody gets something out of it, and the best way of all is through starting a conversation. I’ll give you the example of my mother, who’s 80. She went to the Imperial War Museum in London with my youngest children, and at the Imperial War Museum she saw a ration book from during the war, and an identity card. She saw these in exhibits, and the following weekend she came over to our house, she had clutched in her hand her identity card from the war to show to her grandchildren. For the first time ever, she began talking about living as a small child during the second World War, something she’d never talked to me, her daughter, about or her grandchildren about. So museums are really excellent at supporting and encouraging family conversations which involve all members of the family.

So Dea’s organization has grown so much that she started a family-friendly award for museums in the UK, and in 2014, there were 130 nominations.

Well I can tell you, um, our past winners of the award. Small museum, Falmouth Art Gallery in Cornwall, the really southwest of England. They have lots of programs working with babies, for the under-twos. Another of our award-winning museums: Mansfield Museum in the north of England, in an area that would be considered disadvantaged. And why that works so well is that their museum is a community resource. So the local choir comes and sings amongst the objects, it’s where they practice. You can have any kind of involvement with the community and end up at Mansfield Museum, because it is the home for the community and as you end up there then you get to know the museum and its fabulous collection.
But then there’s the group of people out there that are a little bit harder to reach: the teenagers. Dea worked extensively with teenagers and found out exactly what they were looking for in a museum experience.

They aren’t comfort—in a museum, they find museums quite uncomfortable places to be. They very rarely have places to sit down. If they do, it’s often a hard wooden bench right in the middle of the room. Who wants to sit on a hard wooden bench in the middle of the room? What teenagers said, they want nice soft seating at the side we can slouch on. And of course, if you allow a teenager to slouch in a gallery, they’re going to spend that time looking at the stuff right in front of them. If you encourage them to stay there longer, they have a better experience of it. So something as simple as soft seating can really encourage teenagers. There’s an example of this in Britain at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, where they have a fantastic collection of Pop art, including quite a lot of Andy Warhols. And they were redesigning the gallery, and they had a teenage panel advise them on what they wanted there. The teenage panel said, ‘we’d like big sofas,’ so they put in big, white sofas. Very risky thing to do. When you go in to Wolverhampton Art Gallery now, you will find teenagers all over those sofas, and you will find probably the most informed teenagers on Pop art in Britain.

Kids in Museum just celebrated their tenth anniversary, and you’ll never guess where the party was held.

The Royal Academy. They do great work with families. The just removed the admission charge for all children under twelve as a result of working with us, so it’s a fantastic partnership. So it just shows that out of those kind of experiences, first-hand experience by families, really good work in museums can result.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

We leave you with this last piece from Paula Richter who tells us a story of her experience as a young kid going to summer camp at a living history museum.

I think I was about fourteen-years-old. My mother enrolled my sister and I in a weeklong program at Old Sturbridge Village. Old Sturbridge Village is a living history museum in central Massachusetts that focuses on life in New England in the early 19th century. They have a collection of historic architecture. There’s a church, a general store, a lawyer’s office. I can clearly remember the costume I was assigned. It was a pink and white gingham empire-style dress, long dress, with a white bonnet that went with it. I was assigned to the Pliny Freeman Farm, and they taught me how to winnow, to separate the chaff from grain by throwing it up into the air with a big basket that allowed bits of straw and other materials to be sifted from the grain itself. And so I spent one afternoon outside with my big basket, sifting away and telling visitors what I was working on. I think the strongest impression for me though was the staff there were so welcoming. They made us feel a part of the team. They treated us as though we were adults, though we were children. Very respectful, and it really contributed to having a really great time there.

I think in life, we sometimes have experiences that really peak our interest in wanting to explore new directions. The experience at Old Sturbridge Village affirmed for me that the museum world was a very dynamic, interesting place, and that later on, after I finished college it was something I might be able to do in a professional way on an ongoing basis.
My name is Paula Richter, and I am Curator for Exhibitions and Research at the Peabody Essex Museum.

Chip: That’s our show. Thanks for listening. You know, this is only our third episode, but already we’ve seen a doubling of listenership from episode one to episode two. So thanks very much to all of you listening.

[PUNK MUSIC FADE IN]

Dinah: And again, come find me at the Third Coast International Audio Festival in Chicago in November. Ira Glass, I’m looking for you.

Chip: We know you’re listening. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this podcast today. Todd Wemmer, Chris Wren.

Dinah: Little Georgia.

Chip: Dea Birkett and Paula Richter. And to our audio engineer, Corbett Sparks.

Dinah: Yes, that’s his real name.

Chip: Extra special thanks to Chris Wren who hooked us up with the musician that you’re hearing right now.

Dinah: That’s right. This track is by Charles Chaussinand, and it is a cover of Podington Bear’s ‘Proliferate,’ which you’ve heard throughout the podcast.

Chip: You can find links to both artists in the show notes for this podcast at connected.pem.org.

[PUNK MUSIC OUTRO]

Chris: Hey, Georgia, come over here and say thank you and say goodbye.


Chris: Can you sing a song? Can you sing ‘Puff the Magic Dragon?’

Georgia: [SINGING] Puff the Magic Dragon-on-on—

Chris: What, does he live by the sea?

Georgia: [SINGING] Lived by the sea in Honalee.

Chris: Yeah?

[CHUCKLING. FADE OUT]

[END]