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In Our Own Backyard

The Washington National Cathedral Looking Up In Wonder

by Gina Hagler

The huge circular window above the main entrance was the first thing my kids noticed as we walked up to the Washington National Cathedral to begin our tour. Brenda Borkoski, our guide and manager of school and family programs at the Cathedral, told us it's called a Rose Window and that there are three of them at the Cathedral - one above each main entranceway. From the outside it was the sheer size of the window that attracted my kids' attention. Once inside they were struck by the colors as the sun shone through the stained glass. While they were looking up, they couldn't help but notice the flags waving overhead representing every state, territory and district in the United States. To give us a better look, Borkoski took us up to a loft area where we were eye level with the flags and windows and could get a sense of the scope of the entire Cathedral.

Stories In Stained Glass

Each stained glass window has a number of vertical panels that make up that window's story. Borkoski told us that "stained glass windows contain stories that can often be 'read' from left to right, just like a book. Look for symbols to add meaning to the stories." That was all my kids needed. Each of them took a close look and found something of interest. For Tess, my 7-year-old, it was the figures as she recognized the animals looking out the windows of Noah's arc. Seth, my 11-year-old, was more interested in the colors and the way some of them seemed more like abstract works than definite pictures. Jason, my 16-year-old, was interested in the specific stories being told, especially once Borkoski told us, "There are over 200 stained glass windows in the Cathedral. Some stories come from the Bible, others from United States history." With that in mind, my kids kept their eyes out for history-inspired windows. They were happy to see that Abraham Lincoln and George Washington each had their own statue and window. They were also excited to see the stained glass window commemorating the Apollo 11 mission when men first walked on the moon. That window, on the right-hand side of the Cathedral and about two-thirds of the way to the front, has one picture contained in its frame rather than portions in each individual panel as we saw in the other windows. Looking out that window is like looking out at a starry night. My daughter was quick to point out the planets and shooting stars. Seth was fascinated by the moon rock in the middle of the red planet in the upper portion of the window. Directly above our heads was a Boss Stone - supporting the weight of the Cathedral in conjunction with other structural elements - which caught my oldest son's attention. Also toward the front of the Cathedral is the Cathedra, or bishop's chair. The presence of this chair, made entirely of stone, is the reason the Cathedral is a cathedral rather than just a large church. The bishop, as head of the diocese, has his chair here. Equally impressive was the pulpit where spiritual leaders from the major faiths are welcome and such people as the Dali Lama and Martin Luther King, Jr., have spoken. And my kids liked the grandeur of the Crossing - the place where the center aisle is crossed by an aisle going from left to right to form a cross - with the four tallest pointed arches in the whole Cathedral overhead and the Bell Tower with its carillon and peal bells above that. In fact, at the top of the Bell Tower you'd be at a height greater than that at the top of the Washington Monument because the Cathedral is built atop Mount Saint Alban - 300 feet tall before a stone was even laid.

Gargoyles and Grotesques Galore

By the time we'd toured the Cathedral, my kids were ready for some hands-on activities. We followed the signs to the Gargoyle's Den at the crypt level. Designed for kids escorted by adults, the den has several activity stations. "Each station has a handout the children can take with them," said Mary Fredlake of the Gargoyle's Den. "On the back there's a map where they can find an actual example of what they've done here - stained glass, rubbings, etc. On the front is more information on the topic - stained glass, rubbings, etc. The activity is an example they can make here and take home or take home to do later as a reminder." One station had stained glass bookmarks. Another had symbols from the Cathedral, with materials to create a rubbing. There was an area where my kids tried their hand at chipping away at a stone block. At another station kids can assemble arches and a flagstone patio. Mosaics can be created with bits of paper at another. And, finally, there's a station where kids can create their own gargoyles. Until our tour, none of us had known that gargoyles are part of a larger group called grotesques. Both gargoyles and grotesques are designed to direct rainwater from the roof of a building away from that building. Gargoyles do it by means of a pipe, so that in most cases, the water comes out of the gargoyle's mouth. Grotesques are designed to have water run over their heads or off their backs - without a pipe of any sort. My 7-year-old was very interested in the sample gargoyle in the Gargoyle's Den, which had water running out of its mouth, while my 11-year old was happy to see a plaster cast of the Darth Vader grotesque. The actual grotesque sits on the North Tower. The design was submitted by a boy from Nebraska as part of a contest held in the 1980s.

Greenhouse & Gardens

We headed for the Greenhouse once we were done in the Gargoyle's Den. The Greenhouse has many different types of herbs, lots of statuary, pots and planters. Jamie Cormier, supervisor, told us, "Children are always welcome because it's nice to start them gardening at a young age. There's so much that's tactile about plants. You can touch them and smell them. You can have them help you with your garden or make a smaller garden of their own - a fairy or elf garden - in a terracotta bowl or planter box." The Greenhouse has everything you need for a fairy garden, from terrarium-size plants, trellises, hoes and rakes, to statues of fairies. Before we left, Cormier let my kids hold the bunny living there.

There's a wonderful book and gift store at the Cathedral. We found the area with the snacks and took a break in the Visitor's Lounge before fully exploring. All in all we had a wonderful time at the Cathedral and are looking forward to going back. My oldest son would like to see an exhibit celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Cathedral. And we've all decided that next time we're taking our binoculars so we can get a closer look at those grotesques and gargoyles!

Gina Hagler is a frequent contributor to *Washington Parent* and enjoys taking her three kids on excursions around the area.

The Washington National Cathedral is located at the intersection of Wisconsin and Massachusetts avenues. There is parking on Wisconsin Avenue or, on Saturday, you can park on the Cathedral grounds.

Programs:

Gargoyle's Den. Open Saturdays from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. Closed the Saturdays before Easter and Christmas. For kids ages 6 to 12 with an adult. \$5 per group up to 4, then \$1 per additional individual.

American Gargoyles. A gargoyle tour. Binoculars recommended. Ages 10-up. Held on the fourth Sunday April through October at 2 p.m., and on the fourth Thursday May through July at 6:30 p.m. No reservations; tour meets at the docent station, main level. \$5. Additional information, e-mail tours@cathedral.org, call 202-537-2223 or visit www.visit.cathedral.org.

Family Saturday! Monthly Series. Each program will explore a different theme in the Cathedral's art and architecture. To register, or for more info, join the e-mail list by sending a message to

bborkoski@cathedral.org.

Self-Guided Family Treasure Hunt. Get brochure at the Docent station.

Exhibits/Tours:

Dreamers and Believers: Cathedral Builders Open through November 2008. Engaging exhibit using stories, voices, images and film to celebrate the visionaries, donors, artists and workers who built the Cathedral.

Look Up in Wonder Tour:

Mondays through Fridays. Daily specialty tours focusing on the Cathedral's stained glass windows and behind-the-scenes spaces.

Site for more information: <http://www.cathedral.org/cathedral>

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