

## **Gift Shops Can Ring Up \$\$\$**

By Jean Kinney, Enquirer Contributor

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When Scotty Heuck was helping to organize a children's shop at the then-new Cincinnati Museum Center in the early 1990's, her allotted space was three floors down, and "you had to pay to get in" because it was in the natural science museum, she recalls.

The gift shop at the Cincinnati Art Museum had even humbler beginnings. It was formed in 1969 by a few volunteers with a borrowed budget of \$3,000 and an empty museum closet for a storefront.

Over the next decade, the children's store at the Museum Center moved its way up to the main floor as it became more profitable. Nonprofit institutions everywhere have caught on to a simple fact: "People like to shop. They like to take something home with them," said Irene Light, buyer and manager for the Hamilton County Park District gift shops.

Today's nonprofits are way beyond souvenir postcards and pencils, and the gift shop can provide major budget contributions to cash-strapped organizations. They're an important visitor amenity as well as a revenue source, said Museum Center chief executive officer Douglass McDonald. "I tell our retail people, 'Your mission is to make a profit.'"

How the different area gift shops do that is varied as the nonprofit institutions they serve.

Both the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Museum Center ring up close to and right at, respectively, the \$1 million mark in annual sales in their shops but share little else in common. Their managers have learned to identify their most loyal constituents and present the most profitable merchandise accordingly, while adhering to the primary mission of their institution.

Heuck and Museum Center gift shop manager Barb Witschger can't help but notice that 1,800 school children can visit the Museum Center in Queensgate on a single day, so the Store to Explore stocks plenty of items at \$5 or less. Young shoppers with just a dollar or two in their pockets are accommodated by pricing some items, such as the stone arrowhead carved (in this century) by Native Americans, at 94 cents. With tax, it costs exactly \$1.

The Store to Explore occupies 4,000 square feet and, in addition to housing a bookstore, is stocked with mostly science-related items geared to children and adults. The Museum Center's other shop on the main floor is smaller and caters primarily to adults with, among other items, jewelry or decorative nature-oriented merchandise. In the lower-level Duke Energy Children's Museum is a more toy-oriented shop.

The gift store at the art museum in Mount Adams is 1,100 square feet and stocks higher-end merchandise such as pottery, jewelry, glasswork and art-related DVD's or books, said museum retail coordinator Debbie Molzberger. Since the museum waived admission fees in 2003, Molzberger said, more families are visiting, so this summer a kiosk near the museum's education center will stock children's art supplies. Last year, a temporary holiday store rang up \$75,000 in just eight weeks, she said.

## **THE LIBRARY**

At the downtown library, Martha Totten recognizes that a big percentage of shoppers at the Friends of the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County gift shop she manages are workers on their lunch

break. Many come to shop, on the mezzanine level of the library at 800 Vine St., to buy greeting cards.

Half of the library shop is dedicated to donated books for sale. Most of the rest of the shop's merchandise is priced under \$15, encouraging shoppers in for a birthday card to pick up a last-minute gift from among the store's novelty items for children and adults.

Totten is one of the few paid employees of the Friends of the Public Library, an almost-all-volunteer organization that contributes nearly \$200,000 annually to the library's operating budget. The gift shop's annual sales range from \$100,000 to \$150,000, Totten said.

## **FREEDOM CENTER**

At the other end of downtown, on the Ohio River, The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center gift shop aims to appeal to visitors' historic interests, said shop manager and buyer James Tecco. "Half of our merchandise is books, a way for patrons to extend their experiences here."

Many of those books deal with America's slave history or the Underground Railroad as well as "global freedom struggles," Tecco said. Other history titles there deal with women, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

Another sales niche for the Freedom Center shop is the large stock of items from around the world considered "fair trade," made by workers as individual artisans receiving a living wage for their products. One popular fair trade souvenir is a beaded bracelet from Central America. Priced at less than \$5, it's scooped up by students on field trips.

## **NATURE'S NICHE**

Surrounded by trees instead of asphalt are the Nature's Niche shops run by and for the Hamilton County Park District. Light, the manager/buyer, serves clientele with a strong outdoor interest. The gift shops are in education centers at five parks around the county, with headquarters at the Farbach-Werner Nature Preserve in Colerain Township. Bird seed is a popular product as are a hefty collection of items featuring the popular wildlife-themed work of local graphic artist Charley Harper.

Light recently returned from the National Museum Store Association convention, where "we learned about e-commerce, and how to make your store stand out," she said. "You network with people and share information and ideas."

Locally the managers of the nonprofit gift shops meet fairly regularly for the same reason as they continue to look for ways to make money and serve as an educational arm of their institution.

Though Light isn't under the same pressure for profits as some of her peers – park gift shops garner less than \$500,000 in sales annually - she is trying to draw different visitors to the parks with upcoming events such as tastings featuring wines from Ohio-grown grapes and art shows by local artists.

Heuck prides herself on continuing to provide educational Merchandise for the Museum Center's youngest visitors, right down to the sticks of rock candy that sell by the tens of thousands each year at \$1 a pop. The confection comes in a bag describing how the mineral-like candy is formed and instructs the kids that it was the sweet of choice for children of yesteryear.

"See? Science and history!" she said.

**Area gift shops and the institutions they serve include:**

Nature's Niche Stores are located at these Hamilton County Parks:

Farbach-Werner Nature Preserve in Colerain Township, The Sharon Centre at Sharon Woods in Sharonville, Seasongood Nature Center at Woodland Mound Park in Anderson Township, Glenwood Gardens on Springfield Pike, and the Miami Whitewater Forest Visitor Center in Crosby Township, Winton Centre also offers a small selection of merchandise. 513-923-3665 or [www.hamiltoncountyparks.org](http://www.hamiltoncountyparks.org).

The Library Friends' Shop at the Main Library, 800 Vine St., downtown. 513-369-6035 or [www.friends.cincinnati.library.org/shop.html](http://www.friends.cincinnati.library.org/shop.html)

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, 50 East Freedom Way, downtown, 513-333-7738 or [www.freedomcenter.org](http://www.freedomcenter.org).

Cincinnati Art Museum, 953 Eden Park Drive, Mount Adams, 513-639-2995 or [www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org](http://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org).

Cincinnati Museum Center, 1301 Western Avenue, Queensgate, 513-287-7000 or [www.cincymuseum.org](http://www.cincymuseum.org).

Taft Museum of Art, 316 Pike St, downtown, 513-241-0343, [www.taftmuseum.org](http://www.taftmuseum.org),