

Lucy knows how to start a conversation

By LISA FALKENBERG

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Approaching a glass case holding the world's most famous fossil, one of the most complete hominid skeletons ever found, 10-year-old Garrett Bryant of Odessa peered down at the incomplete jigsaw puzzle of brittle bone fragments and looked disappointed.

"What happened to her skull?" he asked his mother. "I imagine animals drug it off," Marla Bryant answered.

She walked over to examine the lifelike 3½-foot, hairy, half-smiling model of what scientists believe Lucy looked like and had her own questions. "They don't have any finger bones, so how do they know her hand was like that?" Marla Bryant asked her mother, Leona Rice. "They're guessing," Rice replied.

Young Garrett processed the scene for a few more minutes and then shrugged. "She's just a monkey," he declared, and then walked off.

The first public crowds to observe Lucy's 3.2 million-year-old bones on display at the Houston Museum of Natural Science responded with a wide range of human emotion: eye-rolling doubts, probing questions, witty jokes, tears of awe, and deep, philosophical dialogue weighing the spiritual, the scientific and what it means to be human.

"I don't agree with evolution at all," says Leona Rice. "The ape evolved, but I don't think the human came from the ape." "Everything changes, everything evolves," says her son, Marison Rice, whom the family was visiting in Houston.

"Yeah, but if you believe in Adam and Eve and that God created man in his image, then did God look like that?" his sister, Marla, says. "Was he a little 3-foot-tall hairy man?" "Well, no," her brother says. "He could be a little short guy or maybe God's the missing link." "No, he has a big white beard and a white, flowing robe," his sister says, breaking into a laugh. "You know you've seen God before!"

Both sides of debate

Still, she said it was important to her to see the exhibit and expose her son to the idea of evolution for the first time: "All kids should know the evolution side and the religious side, because there's something to it or we wouldn't be finding millions and millions of years-old stuff."

A few minutes later, 35-year-old Deena Dail, from Austin, was sniffing over Lucy's bones. "You can tell who the nerds are," she said to a friend. "They're all crying."

Dail, who said she studied anthropology in college, said she considered the exhibit a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "I can't imagine anybody leaving this exhibit and not believing that this is real," Dail said, her voice cracking, wiping tears under her glasses. "That's the cradle. We're looking at humanity at its earliest point that we know of. And we're seeing our ancestry, you know, everybody, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, belief systems.

"Before we composed this complex society we live in, we had Lucy. And it's the unifying thing."

In the first weekend of Lucy's world premiere, thousands of people trickled into a darkened room to behold the remnants of one of humanity's earliest ancestors. They approached her glassy tomb slowly, respectfully, as though it were an altar, speaking mostly in whispers. Some lingered, crouched and hovered, causing a security guard to constantly nudge them back.

Meeting Lucy

My own stomach was aflutter with anticipation. Looking down at her broken pelvis, her sturdy lower jaw, complete with one row of well-preserved teeth, I imagined them as part of a live being, moving, running, breathing 3.2 million years ago.

Believers and doubters of evolution alike said being in the presence of something so old and real produced an energy that could never be felt from a replica. Her history could be ours. Her fragility reminds us of our own.

"You know it's the real thing," a woman said, tearing up. "I can feel it in my bones." "That is wild!" said a teen. "She broke her bones," announced a toddler. "She's so cute, so short," a woman said. "She had her wisdom teeth," an older man said. "When they find my legs 3.2-million years from now, I'll have a metal rod in there," one man said to his son. "They'll say, 'What did he do to break that leg?' "

"It was interesting, for what it was," said R.L. Crockford, 45, of Houston. "She's an ape." Crockford and her cousin visiting from Alaska both said they doubted the conclusions scientists have drawn from the discoveries. They don't believe Lucy is any kin of theirs.

"What was that line in there? The questions they ask in the exhibit? 'What is our origin? What is our purpose?' " Crockford says. "How many monkeys go around debating that question? That's a human question."

Linda Piper, a humanities professor from Albuquerque, N.M., shook her head solemnly as she stood over Lucy's bones. The experience, she said, brought her closer to God. "Just to observe the whole evolutionary process, how wonderful it is. That we are all from the same being, the same construction, and the same energy and network of life. That we are not separated," she said. "That we are one."