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The Shores family and Mrs. Frei  
photo provided by FX

# 30 DAYS



Where does freedom of religion end and where does freedom *from* religion begin?

Representing a “typical Christian family” on national television was no doubt a daunting undertaking, says Mr. Shores, a 40-year-old business executive. However, after discussing the opportunity to do the show with family and friends, it was an opportunity to share their faith that they just couldn’t pass up.

“The evening before all this happened I was on a business trip and in my hotel room I happened to come across this Christian woman on television just screaming about something,” Mr. Shores says. “I remember thinking to myself ‘it seems like there would be someone better to represent what it is to be a Christian.’”

The next day, he says a friend informed him that a neighbor’s daughter was a casting director for FX and that he’d signed them up to be on the show. “I thought they’d be looking for some kind of ‘Clever Family’ to do it,” says Mr. Shores. “That’s not us at all.”

Timing was an issue as well. Mrs. Shores, 37, was seven months pregnant and home with their daughters Payton, 10, Sarah, 4, and Hannah, 2. Their youngest daughter, Ella, was born in June. To make matters worse, Mr. Shores, president and founder of TXP-Texas Prototypes, was smack dab in the middle of taking his company public.

“I was concerned about the more practical aspects of it,” says Mrs. Shores. “Cooking meals, caring for the kids – I could imagine that there would be

## 30 Days in the Mirror

By Susan Ayala Bland

**FOR THIRTY DAYS**, Frisco residents Michael and Tracy Shores took the phrase “practice what you preach” to an entirely different level.

They agreed to take part in a social experiment of sorts in the form of a television show called *30 Days*, which airs on FX Television. For this episode, which aired in August, a Christian family (the Shores family) welcomed into their home a 46-year-old wife and mother of four, Brenda Frei, who is a professed atheist.

The television show is the brainchild of Morgan Spurlock, of Oscar-nominated

documentary *Super Size Me* fame, in which he ate nothing but food from McDonald’s restaurants three times a day for thirty days and chronicled the resulting impacts on his health.

For *30 Days*, Mr. Spurlock handed down three commandments for the atheist to follow: “Thou shalt find shelter under the same roof as a Christian family. Thou shalt attend weekly church services. And, thou shalt join thy fellow worshipers in Bible study.” At issue: Will interacting with a Christian family have any impact on someone who is a professing atheist?



Michael and Tracy Shores at a church service

photo provided by FX

times when I would be too tired to get everything done.”

Soon the Shoreses were seeing this opportunity as a relational adventure and healthy challenge for their faith. As a result, they turned down the usual financial compensation for being on the show, opting for living and babysitting expenses to be covered instead.

The show began taping in March, with days starting between 6-8 a.m. and ending anywhere from 8-11 p.m. The five-member camera crew camped out at a local hotel and the only breaks were a couple of days interspersed throughout the thirty-day period.

Before embarking on her journey to Texas, on the show we see Mrs. Frei sitting down to a cozy family dinner in her Lawrence, KS, home. She asks her young son, “Do you believe that there’s some ‘being’ or ‘thing’ somewhere that can sit right by you and controls your life?” He pensively answers, “No.” However, when she asks him, “Who controls your life?” her son, with the thought process only children possess, replies, “You do!”

Once settled into the Shores’ home, Mrs. Frei finds herself awkwardly open-eyed during family prayers. Each day brings

activities such as visiting a local religious tract publisher, an on-air interview at a Christian college radio station and weekly small group Bible studies.

**She says it’s impossible to just strip away all of the years you’ve built up these beliefs. It doesn’t make an atheist “anti-Christ,” we just don’t believe.**

During the Shores’ small group Bible study, Mrs. Frei asks the group of churchgoers if they know “100 percent” that they’re going to heaven. Conversation turns into a debate on faith versus evidence. Neither side is swayed.

Then Mrs. Frei discussed the thought process that led her away from her Christian beliefs. She says it’s impossible to just strip away all the years you’ve built up these beliefs. “And it doesn’t make

an atheist ‘anti-Christ.’ We just don’t believe,” she said.

The show includes snippets of man-on-the-street interviews on how Americans feel about atheists. Quoted is a recent University of Minnesota study ranking atheists as the single least trusted minority group in the United States – coming in below Muslims, recent immigrants and homosexuals when it comes to sharing America’s “vision of a society.”

The *30 Days* episode did not solely focus on a Christian’s point of view. Mrs. Frei describes to the camera the persecution and bullying her children have suffered on the playground at the hands of Christian schoolmates. She also tells the Shores family how she and others that share her beliefs are often afraid to be open with their atheism for fear of retribution.

In a later segment the Shoreses and Mrs. Frei have coffee with three men from the North Texas Church of Free Thought to show the flip side of this spiritual debate. “Free Thinkers” describe themselves as persons who form their opinions about religion independently of tradition, authority or established belief.

As the men described the vicious attacks they have endured by Christians,

Mr. Shores is visibly shaken. “I’m appalled at what I’m hearing from you guys,” he says. “It’s so bizarre. The fundamental basis of Christianity is ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ not ‘love your Christian neighbor as yourself.’” The Shoreses were dismayed that these negative experiences only served to detract from the “real message” of Christianity: because of disobedience, mankind is separated from God and that, by the grace of God and the acceptance of Christ, man can now have a personal relationship with God. This all-important relationship should be evident in the love Christians have for others.

While he was sorry for the negativity the men experienced, Mr. Shores in no way apologized when discussing the subject of the government printing “In God We Trust” on money. His position: America is a primarily Christian nation and should not be forced to erase that from our heritage. “Finally, out of frustration, I just told them that if they were that uncomfortable with it they should move,” he says. “That’s the beauty of living in America. If you can’t live with something you’re free to leave if you want.”

The scenes showing worship at the Shores’ church seemed contrived in the sound bites selected by the show’s production team. When attention is shifted to a service at McKinney Fellowship Bible Church, viewers are assaulted with clips of a minister identifying Christians as “the Lord’s army,” having “war-time missions” and a people called to “take their vision to the whole world.” The way these biblically based concepts were presented made them seem almost sinister and surely

enough to alarm anyone skeptical of Christian teachings.

“That’s a pretty scary analogy,” Mrs. Frei confides to the “diary cam” employed by the show. “It really doesn’t seem to be a message of acceptance and tolerance.”

The Shoreses say Mrs. Frei – who revealed that for more than 20 years she had lived life as a Christian – came armed with an agenda to show that atheists are not bad people and that they have morals, too. The couple decided to approach the situation with a single goal in mind, “We just wanted her to feel loved,” says Mrs. Shores.

The fundamental basis of Christianity is “love your neighbor as yourself” not “love your Christian neighbor as yourself.”

“Here we thought we were going to get this intellectual male – someone in the science field,” says Mrs. Shores. To prepare, the couple spent hundreds of dollars on books to familiarize themselves with evolutionary thought and naturalist philosophies. Mrs. Frei, a stay-at-home mom, holds a Ph.D. in psychology.

Common ground was found between Mrs. Shores and Mrs. Frei in the routine of being stay-at-home moms. Laundry, homework and getting children to bed have a way of bringing together women who are passionate about their families. The family circle was even broadened one

weekend when Mrs. Frei’s family made the trip down from Kansas. In order to give them a feel for what she had been experiencing with the Shoreses, they all attended a concert by one of the Shores’ favorite Christian groups, Third Day.

Mrs. Shores says one lesson she learned from the experience is how important it is to share with your children, at appropriate ages, that there are other faiths and people with different beliefs. “I explain to my four-year-old daughter, Sarah, that the building we pass by when she goes to dance lessons is a mosque and that they believe in Allah,” she says.

To the Shores’ surprise, there were not many heated discussions during the month they spent in a televised fish bowl. The show’s producers focused on relationships versus philosophical and spiritual debate, however that doesn’t mean the show was without some conflict. Most anyone would bristle at having their core beliefs questioned, and at times frustrations ran high.

“There were probably three times (during the entire 30 days) that I got frustrated, and, of course, they showed all of them,” Mr. Shores admits. All in all, the Shoreses agree that they are happy with the way the episode turned out and feel the show’s message was a positive one.

“It was kind of a mirror for the Christian community to see ourselves and remind ourselves that we’re not supposed to be judging people – that’s not what we’re here for,” says Mr. Shores. “We’re supposed to be loving our neighbor no matter who they are.”

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