

OCALI | Podcast – Episode 32

Accessible Sports Venues | with Tim O’Connell and Mackenzie Williams

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[UPBEAT MUSIC]

Simon Buehrer: Hey, everyone. Welcome back to another edition of Connecting The Dots, the Inspiring Change podcast series from the Autism Center at OCALI. I'm Simon Buehrer.

Megan Trowbridge: And I'm Megan Trowbridge.

Simon Buehrer: Megan, it's great to see you again. This is episode number four of Connecting the Dots Podcast Series. Again, we're looking to educate and empower individuals, raise awareness, and build community engagement. I think we're going to touch on all three of those topics today.

But before we begin, you and I have been working together for what, maybe a year or so, so we're still getting to know each other. All right, as a way to learn more about Megan, I wanted to ask you this question as we start today.

Megan Trowbridge, are you a sports fan?

Megan Trowbridge: I am ... but ... [LAUGHS]

Simon Buehrer: But? Wait! I heard the caveat already! What's the but?

Megan Trowbridge: I'm a fan. I like to watch it on TV nowadays though. I'm not a crowd fan much anymore. I love going to sports venues for food. I love the food. I'm not a people person anymore.

Simon Buehrer: [LAUGHS] This is a good distinction. You would be happy if you went to a ballpark, and had a Ball Park hot dog or something, and then just turned around, and left, and watched the game somewhere else?

Megan Trowbridge: Sure. In my air-conditioned home.

[LAUGHTER]

But I love sports! I do. I like to watch the Cincinnati Reds. I like the Ohio State Buckeyes. I like college sports more than I do ...

Simon Buehrer: Professional.

Megan Trowbridge: Professional sports. Yeah. But I watch all of it.

Simon Buehrer: No, that's cool. That's what you watch at home. Well, yes, absolutely.

Megan Trowbridge: I know you like football. But not like ... football ... American football.

Simon Buehrer: No, I like football, AND football. I like both footballs. FUTBOL, and football. Yeah. I'm into both. I love going to games in person. That, to me is the best type of experience. Whether it's a stadium or an arena, that's where I'm in my happy spot.

Megan Trowbridge: Good. I've been to a lot of the games. I've been to a Reds game. I've been to a Bengals game. I've been to a Blue Jackets game. I've been to minor league games, like Dayton Dragons. I like those.

Simon Buehrer: Yeah! Absolutely.

Megan Trowbridge: I mean I like going, but I don't like to go all the time. Maybe once a year.

Simon Buehrer: All right.

Megan Trowbridge: Pick a team, pick a venue. Let's go.

Simon Buehrer: All right. Fair enough.

Megan Trowbridge: Last year, we talked with Jim Taylor in one of our podcast episodes about the FC teams where he's at in another country.

Simon Buehrer: He's in Scotland.

Megan Trowbridge: Yes. In Scotland, his football club. He really talked about accessible experiences for fans there, and I love that. I thought it was really good about how you build community. Again, access plus belonging equals community. It's a big thing here at OCALI. He really touched on that.

So, I attended the Accessible Ohio Conference this year. One of the panels was about accessible sports venues. It was amazing, it was such a good panel. When Simon and I were talking about podcasts this year, I thought, we need to bring these panelists on.

Simon Buehrer: And they are here with us now. First off, we have Mackenzie Williams, who is the director of event services for Nationwide Arena. Home of Ohio's only NHL team, the Columbus Blue Jackets. Welcome, Mackenzie. Thanks for being here.

Mackenzie Williams: Thanks for having me.

Simon Buehrer: And we are also thrilled to have Tim O'Connell joining us. Tim is the senior vice president of facilities and operations at the wonderfully named Great American Ball Park. The best named facility in Major League Baseball, and home of one of the most storied franchises in baseball, the Cincinnati Reds.

Tim, thanks so much for coming to us from downtown Cincinnati. Great to have you.

Tim O'Connell: Thank you. That was a great introduction. I have to copy that down.

Simon Buehrer: It's free to use! You're welcome to it.

Tim O'Connell: Yes.

Simon Buehrer: Even though both of you have different roles, different titles, and you're both coming from different sports, different facilities, Tim, you've got an outdoor ballpark, and Mackenzie, you have an indoor arena. I think the commonality is that both of you want to make sure that when your fans come to the game, they have an incredible experience, whoever those fans are.

We talk a lot here at OCALI about access, and accessibility and all of the structures and systems and supports that make access possible. So, I guess as a way of starting out, Tim, I'm just curious to hear from you. Why does accessibility, access matter to Great American Ball Park to the Cincinnati Reds, and to you personally?

Tim O'Connell: Well, I have to go back to when I was hired by the Reds. And our now President CEO told me that ... his family holds the major portion of the ownership, and they operate this venue as well as this franchise.

He told me very clearly: We are not owners. We are stewards of this organization for the people of this community. We will not be taking from this community; we will be serving this community. I always keep that in the back of my mind.

I think it's a great way to look at the entertainment that we provide. In terms of accessibility, I look at it two ways. One, it's an ethical obligation that we have. We are here for the enjoyment of people that want to see baseball games, concerts. Other activities

we have here. You just do not shut people out. If you want to be a good community steward, you do not shut people out.

But Number 1, it's an ethical obligation, and I feel very strongly about that. This is just not some fly by night message, that the venue operators in Ohio are telling everyone. This is a cultural obligation for us, so.

Megan Trowbridge: Mackenzie, what about you? Because Nationwide Arena, it's not just a sports venue. You guys host a lot of events. What does that mean for you with accessibility?

Mackenzie Williams: For me, I mean I'm on the real guest services side of it. I've worked in guest services since I got my first job. For me, it's always been about the heart of it. The guest services is the heart, I think, of any operation. What that means is we truly, truly care about what our guest experience is, and who we're serving, and making sure that every single person that comes into our venue, into our spaces is having the best night of their lives. Because it might be a once in a lifetime opportunity for them. Everyone deserves to have that experience, so where the accessibility comes in is making sure that if families come here, they're able to stay the whole time. They're able to enjoy it without the worries, and experience live events. Hockey, anything we do, with the same amount of joy that everybody else around them is experiencing that with. Like Tim said, we do have an obligation to our communities to make sure that we are the pioneers in that space, in creating that environment.

Megan Trowbridge: That's great. At OCALI, we have this framework that we use that's "Access plus Belonging equals Community." It's embedded in everything that we do.

I'm hearing that from both of you, access plus belonging equals community. When you think about that, how do you get leadership on board? I hear the passion in your voices, but how do you get leadership on board with that?

Mackenzie Williams: I know for me it's been really beneficial to work with all the other people and groups in the community, because having that backing of another group of saying, hey, we're out here in that space all the time. These are the needs we're seeing. If you build it, they will come kind of thing? Where it's like, this will impact your business. It impacts this community. These are the people that you want in your space. That does help having those advocates on board.

But also, and I'm sure Tim probably experienced the same thing is, because we are so passionate about it, sometimes that does make it easier to get other people on board. When you know what you're talking about, you're coming with the facts. You're coming with real life experience. It does help to get those to keep going. But it also just depends on who your leaders are, and building those relationships. Showing them how these continued efforts are propelling us forward.

Megan Trowbridge: Tim?

Tim O'Connell: It's been very easy for me. Again I go back to our philosophy, and our obligation to our community, our obligation to abide by the laws, both state, and federal, and local. I have not run into a roadblock.

Matter of fact, the only roadblock we've run into at times is how do we do it? How do we find out? How to do X, Y or Z, and do it right? Because the one thing we pride ourselves on here at the Reds, is that when we do it, we will do it right. We're not just going to put a band aid on it because it just never works. That's the only challenge I have. Leadership, ownership, there is absolutely no pushback. I'm very fortunate.

Simon Buehrer: Tim, are there some specific examples of things that you feel like the Reds are really doing right, and maybe even leading the charge either in Major League Baseball or just as a venue?

Tim O'Connell: I can't ... I don't know if we're leading the charge, but a couple of things that I am very proud of is one, our training. We train all of our staff annually. Part of that training is about accessibility. That accessibility is customer service, but also about what do we do during an emergency? Which I think at times is forgotten about. That is certainly one of my highlights. We have done that for years. It's just a great program that we put out to our employees.

The other thing is, we have introduced a sensory room a couple years ago. Oh my Lord, five years ago now. In that same sense, we do notifications. We do a lot of fireworks. Cincinnati loves its fireworks.

Simon Buehrer: [LAUGHS] Well you've got a lot to celebrate!

Tim O'Connell: Yes. This year we had some celebrations, which is very positive if you're a Reds fan. But we do notifications to make sure that people realize that there is going to be those type of activities. If those create issues, one, we have facilities for it. We have protocols for it. Just look at one of our folks, and we'll take good care of you.

In terms of planning, that is the other thing that I'm very proud of. We seek input about how are we going to put accessibility needs into construction projects? I oversee or coordinate all of our construction projects. I'm very transparent that accessibility is on the top of the list. Making sure, again, that we are serving all of our customers, and not just a small percentage of them.

Mackenzie Williams: Well, it is one of those things, too, where we talk a lot to other venues. Even though Tim's in a ballpark, I'm in an arena, we can still learn so much from each other.

You start thinking about, like, Oh my gosh, okay, I need to do this. I need to do this ... So many ideas start flowing! You have to pick and choose. Where am I going to start? What am I going to do first?

Megan Trowbridge: So how do you prioritize that, Mackenzie? You're talking about lots of projects that you're interested in, but how do you prioritize it?

Mackenzie Williams: Yeah. Sometimes it is what is it that we can do first, and get going quickly? A lot of the times there's some things that take just a bit more planning. They take a bit more groups, and put a little more ... so many cooks in the kitchen.

Tim O'Connell: Capital.

Mackenzie Williams: Sometimes a little bit more money. It really is, what's doable right now? What can we start on? Who do we need to get involved? For me too, it depends on if there's something whereas I'm walking around and viewing events. The things that I experience, and stuff that I get asked from guests.

Usually that goes to the forefront, because I'm like, right now, someone is in my building asking me for this. I'm seeing the need right in front of me, so sometimes those come to the forefront naturally that way.

Other times there are things where it might not be something that is regularly asked, but it's because without that feature, the people that need it might not be able to even come to the building. It's not just seeing what's there on an event day, but what is stopping some people from coming in.

That is really what I think my focus has been on as I've been going in this accessible journey is how do I get more people access to these events? What's stopping them? What can I do to help? Just trying to be on, I think we all would love to be on the forefront of accessibility. What's new, what's out there, and what are the high-priority accessibility needs from the community?

Simon Buehrer: Yeah, I'd be curious to hear, Mackenzie. Is there a recent example of somebody in the building that you witness firsthand, like, oh ... this person needs ... this would make this experience better for this particular person in this moment. Maybe I can take this and use it somewhere along the line to benefit others.

Mackenzie Williams: Yeah, recently ... I didn't have one particular person, but we have assisted listening devices, but maybe getting some audio description and better audio description. I met with a few different people who explained how that all works, actually having someone come in and they're describing not only, yes, what's happening on the ice but what's happening in the crowd.

It's one of those things that I didn't really think of. I'm like, okay, well, we have the devices, anybody that can't see what's happening on the ice can at least hear what's going on, but

they're only getting part of the story. Because, as they explained it to me, if you're not able to see what's on the ice, and all of a sudden, the crowd starts going wild, but it's not necessarily something that happened ...

Simon Buehrer: During the game.

Mackenzie Williams: ... in the game. Someone started the wave in the crowd so everybody's going crazy, and you're like, why is everybody going nuts around me? There hasn't been a goal? There hasn't been a fight, what's going on?

Even the in between stuff. Like, when they do the little games for the TV timeouts and the activations like that.

Simon Buehrer: Dropping the t-shirts, yeah.

Mackenzie Williams: Yeah, you're not getting a description of those or what is on the Jumbotron, if there's a Kiss Cam going on. I hear a bunch of people yelling. I'm like, what's going on? Learning about that was really interesting and just opened my eyes to something where we're doing part of it, but maybe not doing everything we can.

Megan Trowbridge: Trying to capture the whole experience.

Mackenzie Williams: Correct, and it's been just little things like that throughout the journey of, okay, we might be doing this, but we could do it even better and reach more people and keep going and keep evolving and adapting it.

Megan Trowbridge: I think that's great, because you always hear about, like, the vibe of a crowd. Like, how do you capture that live? You can't see it. Or maybe if you can't hear it. So, thinking about that whole experience, I think that's great.

So, I'm from the Autism Center specifically at OCALI. So I'd like to just focus a little bit specifically on autism and what support you're putting into place for individuals with autism. Like, do you have community events? Like, what are specific things you're doing at your venues? Like, what are you doing to support autistic families? Mackenzie, do you want to start?

Mackenzie Williams: I can start. We built our sensory room a few years ago now. I worked originally with a kid again. We came together to talk about a lot of accessibility stuff, and we talked specifically about the sensory room, and they connected me with some people from Bridgeway Academy, and they told me these are the things that you should have in the room and some considerations and how we do it. So that was super helpful to figure out the needs of that, and then we actually ended up getting a corporate sponsorship with Safelite for our sensory room.

So they were able to come in and add even more to the space, which was fantastic, and then we actually ended up hosting one of our one of our Blue Jackets players, his son has

autism, and so he brought in his entire kindergarten class, and we had, like, a whole unveiling, and it was like, it was a beautiful moment. That's just something. Like, the sensory room itself has been a pet project of mine for a while, and we're actually now still talking about renovating it and getting even more stuff, and it's just been such a blessing to have.

We have people use it every single event that we have, and so many people use it, which has been great to see. People love it, have gotten so many great comments about having it. So that is one of our biggest, I think, accomplishments, and we have our sensory kits at our guest services desk, as well, and we've had those for quite a while.

Simon Buehrer: So people can borrow those when they come in.

Mackenzie Williams: Yeah. We have just the headphones, if it's just you need the headphones. But then we have a whole kit as well that has some fidget toys. You can get a weighted lap blanket, some different things that just help if it's something where they might not need to fully step out, but just the little things to help while they're sitting there watching the game.

Megan Trowbridge: Like you said earlier, keep them there.

Mackenzie Williams: Correct. Keep them there, keep them there longer. So it does help 'cause the hockey games can be very overwhelming.

Megan Trowbridge: There's cannons.

[LAUGHTER]

Mackenzie Williams: Yes. Unfortunately, Tim has the fireworks. We have a full cannon. That, hopefully, if we're doing good, gets ...

Simon Buehrer: Gets fired a lot.

Megan Trowbridge: Yeah, I will never forget the first time that thing went off. Nobody told me about it.

[LAUGHTER]

I about jumped over the railing.

Mackenzie Williams: Yes. So yeah, it can be a very overwhelming experience. So, we've been trying and working with different groups to make sure that our games are able to be accessed for people with autism or family members with autism.

Simon Buehrer: How does it work, then, Mackenzie? Is it just, stop by when you need it, or do you ask people to make reservations in advance or how do you coordinate use of that sensory space?

Mackenzie Williams: So, we have signs posted all over the building. It just says to see the guest services desk, and so that's mainly because we put the room off in an area, not like really hidden, but, like, in a lesser trafficked area so that way we could keep the quiet space of it.

So that's mainly ... we tell them to see a guest services member just so that we can show them to the space ourselves. They don't have to make a reservation. They just ask us about it. We have someone stationed right outside the room just to monitor traffic in case we would get an instance where there might be too many people in there.

Luckily, we haven't run into that too much. People are usually the ones that need the space are usually pretty good of seeing if there's already people in there. Like, maybe we wait our turn and walk around a little bit. But it's been really good. Everybody is ... it's a big enough space that we can fit three or four probably small groups in there comfortably with different things to do.

So yeah, we try to make it as easy to access as possible.

Megan Trowbridge: Tim, what do you guys do for families with autism?

Tim O'Connell: Well, first of all, Mackenzie, you will probably be getting a call this afternoon from one of my folks about your sensory place. That's my takeaway!

Mackenzie Williams: Absolutely. I'm happy to answer the questions.

Tim O'Connell: Do not be surprised. I just thought that was great.

Simon Buehrer: Connecting the dots.

Tim O'Connell: Yeah. This is just like Mackenzie said earlier. It's about learning and stealing ideas. I will steal as many ideas as I possibly can. But like Mackenzie, we have a sensory room, and it's fortunately, one of our large sponsors is TriHealth, which is a huge regional hospital and medical association.

It was funny this year, and I think one of your questions was lessons learned. So we had an individual from Children's Hospital here in Cincinnati. She has a child that has autism. She went in her room. She wrote us back. The very next day, she said, "Listen, that is really nice. Everything you've done in there is great, but we hear sounds."

And we go, "What do you mean? You hear sounds? That's supposed to be ..." So, we actually reached out to our friends at the state and said, can you help us out? We have

money in our budget to soundproof that room more this year so that we can make sure that is providing service to our customers as it's needed.

But so it is something that we are always open to feedback. My counterpart in HR, she always says feedback is a blessing, and it is, because how many people have gone in there with the expectation that it's going to be a quiet room, and really, it wasn't that quiet. We are certainly continuing to learn, and I just want to bring up one thing that, like Mackenzie, not only are the buildings doing things, the industry is doing things.

So for example, MLB has a program called ADA Coordinators, and we have two individuals that just became certified in that, that are within my department, and that program is to make sure that the needs for our customers that have disabilities and need accessibility to have the best environment possible, as well as to go out and find out what's going on. What are the new trends? What are the things that people are doing that have been successful? So we are getting not only our own ...

I see it as three pillars. We have our municipality, state, and agencies such as yours giving us information. We're learning it on our own, and our industry is giving us information. So, in my opinion, we really don't have any reason to say we don't know what's going on.

But in order to get better, you gotta continue to be ... you gotta be flexible. You gotta say that you are aren't the best, that you can be better, and that's what we're trying to do here, and I know that's what Mackenzie's trying to do and our other venue operators. I've been to many of the public assembly buildings in Ohio, and I'm telling you, this state is very fortunate to have people like Mackenzie and the Guardians and the Bengals and Browns.

Well, that's when the Bengals win. That makes me happy.

But in all sincerity, everyone's trying to do a great job, and I feel that through those three pillars that we have great resources to be able to give us information in order to do a better job.

Simon Buehrer: Well, I appreciate the example you gave, Tim, of the soundproof room. It's not just a one and done, and sometimes you don't know until you have that real life experience. Like, oh ... well, we thought this was soundproof, but until we had families come in and actually experience and then give us that feedback.

So it isn't just throw some money at it, and then it's going to solve itself. But it's a continuously evolving process, and I think I'm hearing that from both of you.

Like, you're always learning, you're always looking for new ways to enhance what you're already doing or introduce new things along the way.

Tim O'Connell: It's funny you asked about senior leadership involvement before support.

That letter from that customer actually went to my boss, who's the president CEO, and he called me up, and he goes, "Meet me up in the sensory room." I said, Okay, fine, and you know what? He goes, hey, can you meet me up there? I got a letter. I want to show it to you, and he is very creative. If he wasn't doing what he does now, he should be an architect. But he is very hands on on all of our projects, and he goes, Hey, I've looked up these following products. We can do this and this and this.

So there's the buy in. When your top person is saying that they take time out of their day to deal with not a complaint, feedback, and it's about accessibility. It's about making your customers feel good and having a good time here. I think there's the message right there.

[UPBEAT DRUMMING AND CYMBALS]

Megan Trowbridge: Well, we want to thank both of our guests for joining us today, Mackenzie Williams, Director of Event Services for Nationwide Arena, home of the Columbus Blue Jackets, and Tim O'Connell, Senior VP of Facilities and Operations at Great American Ball Park, home of the Cincinnati Reds.

You've been listening to Connecting the Dots from the Autism Center at OCALI.

You can learn more about the Autism Center at ocali.org.

There, you'll find lots of resources, including our Grab and Go Resource Gallery. Lots of great tools you can use or adapt to help you prepare yourself or your loved one for the next time you attend a game or match.

Simon Buehrer: Yes, it is a great resource, and also, we want to mention that we have an excellent community event guide on our website.

So if you yourself are planning an event and you want some ideas for how to make it more accessible, check it out. You can visit ocali.org and simply search for Community Event Guide.

Megan Trowbridge: And all the links to everything we've talked about throughout this podcast will be on our landing page on the Connecting the Dots, this episode.

So thanks again to Tim and Mackenzie, and thanks for joining us. I am Megan Trowbridge.

Simon Buehrer: And I'm Simon Buehrer. We'll see you at the game.

[MUSIC]