

SIMON BUEHRER: Welcome to Inspiring Conversations, bonus content from OCALI's Inspiring Change podcast.

I'm Simon Buehrer.

In episode two, we spent the day at the Ohio State Fair, talking to lots of different people about the Sensory-Friendly Morning and some other new features that were introduced to help make the fair more accessible and navigable for people who have sensory, mobility, and other challenges.

At the beginning of that dazzling Wednesday in July, before the fair officially opened, I spoke with Alicia Shoults, the Marketing and PR Director of the Ohio Expo Center and State Fair, and Angela Krile, Vice Chair of the Ohio Expositions Commission. We basically talked about how the Sensory-Friendly Morning and some of the other new features came together, what they were, who was involved, and how they happened.

Just a couple of quick notes before we roll into it-- the interview took place inside the annex of the Voinovich Livestock and Trade Center. So the recording can sound a little cavernous and echoey at times, but that's part of the charm and authenticity of field recordings.

There's also an offhand reference to a comment made by a Virgil about four minutes and 13 seconds into the interview. I was referring to Virgil Strickler, the General Manager of the Ohio State Fair. This was his comment.

"The Ohio State Fair isn't just about food and rides. It is about community. We want to make the fair as enjoyable as possible for all Ohioans, and sensory-friendly morning is one way we can achieve that goal."

Now that the housekeeping stuff is out of the way, here's my full conversation with Alicia Shoults and Angela Krile.

So I guess just start right from the beginning. So what is the Sensory-Friendly Day here at the Ohio State Fair?

ALICIA SHOULTS: Yeah. So Sensory-Friendly Morning is something that we wanted to do just to make the fair a little friendlier, if it's a simple thing like turning down the lights and sounds just to make the fair a little more inclusive and accessible.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah. But fairs in general are kind of like sensory overload experiences, right? There are the sights, the sounds, the smells, the heat, the people. So walk me through like that process of how do you dial back the fair. Do you know what I mean?

ALICIA SHOULTS: Yeah, that's a very good question. It is a challenge because like you mentioned, there are many things going on at the fair every single day. And when we thought about doing this, we had met with some other fairs that have had similar programs in the past.

And we wanted to see what it was that they had done and then how we could implement something here at the Ohio State Fair. And we were at a board meeting, and I mentioned this. And Angela Krile, who is on our board, shared that she worked with OCALI. And they would be a wonderful resource.

And so that kind of began our relationship and the steps toward how is it that we can actually dial back the fair, because as much as this is something that we would like to do, I'm not an expert in this area. But OCALI are the experts in this area. And so we had several meetings out of the OCALI office.

We did some walkthroughs here on site just to kind of figure out the lay of the land and what is it that we can do to make the fair friendlier. So is that, like I mentioned, turning down the lights and the music and making sure the marching band isn't marching and trying to reduce some of the stimuli that are already going on here?

But also, what is it that we might have that we can really beef up and make sure people are aware of, because we have a beautiful eight-acre natural resources park that's actually a level-two arboretum. And as I've spoken more with all of the experts at OCALI, I've learned that that kind of an environment is actually naturally sensory-calming.

SIMON BUEHRER: You already have that built into the overall fair.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Exactly

SIMON BUEHRER: So it's not like you have to build something else.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Right. And because of where that's located, we worked to try to build out a designated parking area where visitors who are coming to the fair for Sensory-Friendly Morning can park kind of actually more within the grounds of the fair, versus the hike that you might have to park if you are at a car park close to Mapfre Stadium and had to walk all the way down.

So we wanted to get people right inside the grounds, give them the information they need to know about what it is at the fair that they could experience, either like natural resources park or other things they might choose to opt into that would be acceptable, like maybe visiting the petting zoo or maybe touching the udders and milking a cow or--

SIMON BUEHRER: Is that legal? You can do that.

ALICIA SHOULTS: You can really do that. Yeah, we have a milk a cow exhibit every single day where you can really do that. But it's been a really great journey for us to partner with OCALI on this initiative.

SIMON BUEHRER: Angela, can you talk a little bit about that partnership and how the different players came together for this event?

ANGELA KRILE: Yeah. So it was really just by happenstance. And it was a wonderful, serendipitous moment. I was at a board meeting. I'm a commissioner with the Expo Commission, which puts on the state fair.

And Alicia said, we're exploring having a Sensory-Friendly Day. And my face lit up, and I looked at her. And I'm like, I can help with that. My friends at OCALI could help.

And I was so excited to put these two amazing organizations together because I do know from personal experience with taking my niece to Walt Disney World what a challenge it is-- I'm getting teary-eyed. I'm sorry-- what a challenge it is for kids who face those issues to enjoy the things that other kids get to enjoy. And knowing that those kids are going to get-- sorry-- get to come to the fair today and have an experience here that they would never otherwise get to have is really, really great.

SIMON BUEHRER: And it's just like everybody else, right?

ANGELA KRILE: Just like everybody else. That's the important thing. Yep.

SIMON BUEHRER: I've got a quote from Virgil, who said that this area just isn't about food and rides. But it's about community. So how does this event support that idea of the fair is for everyone. The fair is for the community?

ALICIA SHOULTS: Right. Definitely, because it is. And it's something where you could get caught up in the fair being about what is deep fried and on a stick or what is the wildest ride that you can go on. But that's not what it is about.

Virgil's right. It's about community and making sure that we're celebrating all Ohioans. And so this is one of those ways that we can make sure that we're allowing other communities to be a part of the fair. And so we have other initiatives that we're doing.

We give away tickets to various nonprofit organizations to bring community partners in here. We've had special days where we do drives for Ronald McDonald House. And we're working with Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities. We've installed wheelchair charging stations throughout the grounds.

SIMON BUEHRER: And that's the first time, this year?

ALICIA SHOULTS: That's the first time, this year.

SIMON BUEHRER: That's cool.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Yeah, it's very exciting. And we also work with them on these Aira Smart Glasses.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah, tell me about those.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Yeah. So with the Aira Smart Glasses, if you already have the glasses or you download the app and you are blind or have low vision, those individuals, basically, when they walk within the geofenced area of the fair, Aira can connect you to a real-time agent who basically would see through your phone or the app or the Smart Glasses--

SIMON BUEHRER: So they serve as your eyes while you're there.

ALICIA SHOULTS: They serve as the eyes. And so they can tell you that the deep-fried buckeye is 40 feet to your left. Or the nearest restroom sign is down an aisle to your right.

And it's just one of those initiatives where, like you mentioned and Virgil mentioned, the fair's about community. And what are these small steps we can take to make sure that the fair celebrates everyone in the community in Ohio?

SIMON BUEHRER: Right. And so that gives people who are blind or visually impaired a chance to maybe experience the fair in a more independent way than they may normally get to do it, right?

ALICIA SHOULTS: Correct. Exactly.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah, that's really cool. Can you talk about any of the challenges that you had, because

obviously, you'd have to get buy-in from the ride operators and other folks who participate in the fair. Did you have any challenges to work through with them or any difficulties?

ALICIA SHOULTS: You know what? We actually didn't.

SIMON BUEHRER: Wow.

ALICIA SHOULTS: It's amazing because everyone is so supportive of this initiative. And we're very fortunate. We have a brand-new ride provider this year, Talley Amusements. And they had actually been a part of this at another fair, the State Fair of Texas.

SIMON BUEHRER: So they knew it. They knew what it was.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Exactly. They knew what it was. And so they're very familiar with the process. And we worked with the individuals who manage our grounds entertainment out on the grounds and the band and the choir. We are the only fair in the country that has their own youth band and choir.

They each have about 200 members, and everyone was more than willing to adjust their schedules and make sure that anything that could be a sensory overload is an opt-in, that you would have to try to be a part of these and that we are out on the grounds and trying to make everything just tone down a little bit, whether that's the lumberjack show, modifying or reducing the volume, and talking about protective headgear for earphones or--

SIMON BUEHRER: We also have a sensory area where kids can go if they need to--

ALICIA SHOULTS: Exactly--

SIMON BUEHRER: Just kind of unplug for a little while. And it's air conditioned and got some fidgets in there and other different things.

ALICIA SHOULTS: It's amazing. And again, those experts at OCALI have been coming out here and bringing in all of the materials to make that space a safe comforting space where people can kind of just restore--

SIMON BUEHRER: Cool--

ALICIA SHOULTS: Yeah, cool off for a few minutes, have some water.

SIMON BUEHRER: Take a break.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Take a break. Yeah, and then you can get back out and maybe try it again at the fair. And I'm sure we'll get lots of great feedback this year with other adjustments that we can make moving forward.

And that's what this is all about. This is a step in the right direction. And we are so open to information about what else we can do to make the fair more accessible.

SIMON BUEHRER: Well, I've been talking to people all day. So I'll definitely pass along any suggestions--

ALICIA SHOULTS: You'll have lots of insights--

SIMON BUEHRER: Or recommendations that people have.

ANGELA KRILE: I think that's been our biggest challenge with this is that we want to do so much. And there are so many opportunities to make improvements. So how can we do something small now that helps and then continue to build on it every year?

And I do think that's our goal is to continue to make the experience longer, better, more opportunities throughout the grounds in more places, all of those things over time. We all got really excited, and there were a million things we could do. But--

SIMON BUEHRER: You've got to start somewhere.

ANGELA KRILE: We had to start somewhere. Yeah.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Mm-hmm.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah, because the Sensory-Friendly Morning is-- I guess we should have started with that-- is from 10:00 AM to 1:00 PM today. So it's a three-hour window, basically, for folks to take advantage of. And during that time, what's going to happen?

We kind of touched on it a little bit, but the sounds of the midway are going to be kind of toned down a little bit, the lights. Are there are other things that are--

ALICIA SHOULTS: Yeah, that's right. So we would normally have ambient music and announcements and things that we played over the loudspeaker. And all of those are completely turned off. And like you mentioned, the rides, there's usually some music in there and flashing lights. And all of those have been turned off.

And we've communicated with our vendors and all our partners here. No using microphones

and just toning down everything a notch--

SIMON BUEHRER: Just for the morning period of time.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Yeah, for the morning period. And one of the things, too, is that we realize that crowds are a factor--

SIMON BUEHRER: Sure--

ALICIA SHOULTS: And that it's difficult to control the crowds. We don't necessarily know when people are going to attend the fair. So what we did do was we picked a weekday morning, when crowds are naturally lighter, so that we can try to make sure that this experience can be maximized because there's just fewer people on grounds as a whole.

This is something where perhaps a Saturday morning is more convenient for family schedules.

SIMON BUEHRER: Sure.

ALICIA SHOULTS: But unfortunately, it's convenient for a lot of family schedules. And it means--

SIMON BUEHRER: I've been here on a Saturday.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Yeah. See, you know.

SIMON BUEHRER: It's wall-to-wall people.

ALICIA SHOULTS: It is. It's packed. And so we wanted to do this at a time when you've got a little more room to breathe.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah. Alicia, you had mentioned other fairs across the country are doing this-- Texas. Are there other ones that have similar kind of sensory-friendly initiatives?

ALICIA SHOULTS: There are. There's actually a great handful of fairs that do this. And so in the fairs, there's an association where we can all meet. And so we've all met and talked about it. And there's a group message board where we've all been sharing ideas about how to execute sensory-friendly mornings.

And so I can't think of the names of all of the fairs off the top of my head, but there's a good probably 10 fairs across the country that are starting similar initiatives like this. And I think it's one where as that association, the International Association of Fairs and Expos, and all

working together, we can spread these initiatives across the country. So not just the Ohio State Fair's becoming more accessible, but many are.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah. And what about county or local fairs? There's no reason they couldn't also pursue these same kind of--

ALICIA SHOULTS: No, exactly. Another one of our board members is involved in the Adams County Fair here in Ohio, and they've taken some great strides, as well, to make their fair more accessible. And they have some opportunities where individuals can learn how to be a showman and get in the show ring with the animals.

And so you're right. Whether it's the county fairs or the state fairs, there are minor adjustments that can be made that can make a big impact.

ANGELA KRILE: With I think it's 20,000 youth-- is that right, Alicia?

ALICIA SHOULTS: Sounds about right. Yeah--

ANGELA KRILE: That are part of the fair, there are kids involved that have sensory issues themselves that are showing here at the fair. And there are kids with autism who are showing here at the fair. And there are kids--

SIMON BUEHRER: They've been part of the fair for years.

ANGELA KRILE: They've always been part of the fair. They've always been part of 4-H. We just don't know because it's not something that we call out. They're just here, and they're participating.

And that's who they are, and it's part of them. And so I think that's something that's to be celebrated in my mind is that that's always been a part of the fair. It's just now we're allowing people who may not have always participated to come and experience it, too.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah. Yeah, that's really cool. I know it's early, but you're probably already thinking about next year. Have you been talking about different plans or ideas for what we can do to expand this beyond 2019?

ALICIA SHOULTS: You know what? I think-- go ahead, Angela. Yeah. Do you have some ideas?

ANGELA KRILE: No, I think we've seen the interest. We know people want it.

SIMON BUEHRER: We'll see how today goes, take some notes.

ANGELA KRILE: Yeah, we want to make it better and brighter and more wonderful for everybody. So we welcome feedback and ideas. That's part of my job as a commissioner with the Expo Commission is to take those ideas and bring them back so that the staff can evaluate them and talk about whether they're feasible or not.

And so as folks are thinking about it, experiencing it, experiencing other activities in other places around the state and around the country, if they have ideas, bring those to the Ohio Expo Commission. Our information is on the website, the state fair website. You can contact any of the commissioners. We'd be happy to listen to ideas and feedback.

SIMON BUEHRER: That's awesome. That's awesome. Thanks for your time.

ALICIA SHOULTS: Thank you.

SIMON BUEHRER: Thank you.

ALICIA SHOULTS: I love it.

SIMON BUEHRER: You're listening to Inspiring Conversations – bonus content from OCALI's Inspiring Change podcast. I was talking with Alicia Shoults, marketing and PR director for the Ohio Expo Center and State Fair. And Angela Krile, vice chair of the Ohio Expositions Commission. As Angela mentions towards the end of the interview, you can learn more about the Ohio State Fair and connect with fair commissioners and staff through the state fair website – ohiostatefair.com

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Thanks again for listening. I'm Simon Buehrer. See you soon.