

## OCALI Podcast Episode 29

# It's Not a Celebration of Ohio if All Ohioans Can't Come: Building a More Inclusive Fair Experience

**OLIVIA P:** My name's Olivia and my favorite thing about the Fair is the food, the ice cream, and the rides.

**FELIX C:** We just did the skyline, and she loved it. I was terrified.

**ANNA D:** I love going over to the butterfly garden.

**TIANA E:** We love to canoe and fish and stuff, and then we love the dairy farm.

**MANDY R:** I think we're off to try the pickle pizza here soon. That's a new thing here today. I like to try something new every year.

**OLIVIA P:** We do it every year. I think we're starting a tradition, and a lot of our families come here.

[MUSIC]

**SIMON BUEHRER:** From the Autism Center at OCALI, this is *Connecting the Dots*, our *Inspiring Change* podcast series focused on raising awareness around autism to help build and empower communities.

Welcome to our debut episode of this new series.

I'm Simon Buehrer.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** I'm Megan Trowbridge.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Megan, it is great to see you. I'm really excited about this new podcast from the Autism Center. Why don't we start with that? For folks who are not familiar with the Autism Center at OCALI, can you tell us a little bit about who you are, what you do, what you offer?

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** Sure, so we are one of the centers at OCALI and we're this big resource hub that provides information, training, support for individuals with autism, their families, and all the professionals that work with them.

I'm going to talk about some of the supports that we provide throughout the podcast, but we have a fantastic Grab-and-Go Gallery, resource gallery. We've got a lot of online resources,

including this one that we're recording today. I'll be sharing some of those throughout the podcast.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** A wealth of resources and information at the Autism Center at OCALI – [ocali.org/center/autism](http://ocali.org/center/autism) will take you directly there. You can also just go through our main website: [ocali.org](http://ocali.org).

The whole idea behind this podcast series is to amplify all the great work that you're doing at the Autism Center, specifically in an audio format. When you guys first came to me and we were talking about this idea – it's something that I love. As an on-the-go person, I love a good podcast. Because I can take it with me when I am walking the dog, or out on the bike trail, or working in the garden.

It's just a portable format – and it's something that you can *do* while you're doing other things.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** I'm on the road a lot, and so that's one thing that I do is podcasts – and why wouldn't our center do one? Last year we were thinking of a resource that we haven't really tapped into yet and this podcast idea came up. Talking with my director, I mentioned that I've listened to quite a few while I'm on the road. We created within our work scope, this podcast.

We settled on three primary objectives: We really want to educate and empower individuals. We want to really raise awareness and build that community engagement piece.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** I love these objectives. So what we're going to do is use this podcast to highlight conversations. We're going to talk to parents. We're going to talk to professionals. We're going to talk to people on the spectrum. We're going to share stories and personal experiences.

Also, as you've already mentioned, showcase some of the great resources and opportunities available through the Autism Center at OCALI. And we're going to bring everything back under this equation that we've been talking about for the last few years – the Access plus Belonging equals Community, otherwise known as the  $A+B = C$ , equation.

We're going to talk a lot about how to build and support access. So you can cultivate genuine belonging in your groups, in your events, your celebrations, your gatherings. Anything that you're doing to bring people together, we're going to work to help provide you with ideas and resources to help build and cultivate stronger, vibrant, and more dynamic communities.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** When we started talking about ideas of our first podcast, we really wanted to focus on community. One of the things that OCALI does is provide support to the Ohio State Fair. When we think about a strong, vibrant, dynamic community, we thought this would be the best way to kick off our podcast series is focusing on the Ohio State Fair.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Oh, I love the Fair. This is a great idea.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** Of course, you do. [LAUGHTER] The Ohio State Fair – it happens every late July, August. It's one of the longest-running and largest state fairs in the U.S. And our Family and Community Outreach Center and our other OCALI centers, along with some of our partners like DODD, OOD, Autism Society of Central Ohio – we've really worked with the Fair over the past couple of years to build a more inclusive Fair experience where everyone can participate. One of the main features of these efforts is our Sensory-Friendly Morning.

**JESS WEST:** We say that it's a day to experience, the Ohio State Fair with lower lights, lower sounds, so that it's "Fair Lite," we'll say. It's a nice time to come out to a little bit calmer Fair.

So, people can come out, enjoy the entertainment that's maybe a little bit quieter than it traditionally would be. Not hear all the P. A. announcements going on, not see all the flashing lights from the rides. Truly experiencing a little bit quieter, calmer fair.

Even if you're not interested in participating in other Sensory-Friendly Morning activities, this is still such a nice day to come out and experience the Fair just slightly quieter.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That was Jess West. And besides having a cool name, she's the Public Information Officer for the Ohio State Fair and Ohio Expo Center. Jess West, talking about Sensory-Friendly Morning at the Ohio State Fair, which originally had its debut in 2019. It's been going on for several years now really picking up steam and momentum. It starts at 10:00 A.M and it runs until 1:00 P.M. You've got about 3 hours or so there.

As Jess said, that's the time when we turn down the sounds such as the PA system, some of the loud music that you'll hear through the midway. We turn all of that down. It really creates a more sensory-friendly experience for everyone.

Jess went on to tell us about a big change that happened in the Sensory-Friendly Morning this year.

**JESS WEST:** Traditionally, for the past several years, we've had Sensory-Friendly Morning on a Wednesday of the Fair, the second Wednesday of the Fair – a week in. And this year, we're having it on the second day of the Fair. That is a big change. It's happening on Thursday this year. You know, we got some feedback from OCALI and our other partners for Sensory-Friendly Morning and decided let's try out this Thursday and see how it goes.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** As Jess mentioned, we switched the Sensory-Friendly Morning from a Wednesday to a Thursday, and also from that second week to the first week. The main reason why they did that was the tornado siren test that happens every Wednesday at noon in Central Ohio. It happens right in the middle of Sensory-Friendly Morning. It's very loud at the Fair because there's a siren right there at the fairgrounds, which is great, but not on a Sensory-Friendly Morning. Even though we'd tell people, we'd give them an advance notice that it's going to happen. It's still very jarring to hear in the middle of that morning, especially when it's nice and quiet. It definitely is not sensory-friendly.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That's exactly right, Megan, when that siren goes, I mean you can feel it in your bones. But really, it's just a good example of how we have learned over the years that when we offer something like Sensory-Friendly Morning, we always solicit feedback from everyone involved from our other partners, from attendees, from the Fair itself, and we take all of that collective feedback. Then we make little tweaks and modifications and changes to try to make it even better. That's based on feedback and collaboration and continuous work with all of our different partners, which is also really important.

**DR. LAURA SORG:** This day is such an important day. One, it gives individuals a chance to shine here at the Fair to know that this day is really all for them and to know that there are not only amazing attractions, great food, and other things to do, but to also know that there is a wealth of different information, as well as teams that are here to support them, such as us here at Ohio DODD, OCALI, the Autism Society of Central Ohio, etc.

It's going to be a great day. It's perfect weather, and if people, though, if they need a little place to park themselves, if they're having a moment – I know that can happen even for myself. It's great because we have the sensory room and a lot of other important things, especially with our friends from OOD.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** That was Dr. Laura Sorg, and she is the medical director at the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. What was interesting about speaking with her was she came and found me because she really wanted to talk about the partnerships that we have at the Ohio State Fair.

At the very end of the clip, she mentioned OOD which maybe a lot of people don't know what that stands for, but it's the Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities—

**SIMON BUEHRER:** O-O-D, OOD.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** Yes, O-O-D, OOD. And she mentioned another partner – the Autism Society of Central Ohio. She sought me out because she really wanted to talk about these partnerships. We're talking about all the groups and organizations that are involved, and we can't forget again to give a shout-out to our own Family and Community Outreach Center who is very instrumental in leading and coordinating the efforts for the Sensory-Friendly Morning. That center director is Gwen Harshaw. And she's going to introduce our Quiet Room at the State Fair.

**GWEN HARSHAW:** I am standing in front of our lovely Quiet Room, which is a nice respite for all of our visitors. If someone needs to decompress and de-stress a little bit and get away from some of the sounds and sights around here, they can come and visit us here and spend as much time as they need to just relax. It's air-conditioned. We have a lot of things to help them deal with their anxiety. And we're just having a ball.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That was Gwen Harshaw, program director of the OCALI Family and Community Outreach Center, having a ball and also talking about the Quiet Room, which is a great feature that we offer not only on the Sensory-Friendly Morning but throughout the 12 days of the Ohio State Fair. And what it is is just a quiet space, as Gwen described, where

you can go when you need to get a break. I mean, even during Sensory-Friendly Morning, there's a lot of hustle and bustle because there's still a lot of people, right? And people make noise. I mean, there's loud voices, and laughter, and screams – whether of delight or anguish. But the Quiet Room is there when you need a break when you need a time out.

It's an air-conditioned space, which is also really welcome during the very hot days of late July and early August. It's open throughout the Fair. It's not just Sensory-Friendly Morning, but all day, when you need to take a break from the Fair, the Quiet Room is another option.

And we haven't even gotten into some of the other great features that we and our partners have worked with the Fair over the years to provide. Just to tick off a few of them – ASL, American Sign Language that's offered during shows and concerts throughout the fair. Universal changing areas. There are now two of them at the Fair, and they provide safe and dignified spaces for people who need them.

There's also the Aira system, which helps people who are blind or have low vision. It helps them navigate the fairgrounds. It's really cool, Megan. Last year, we kind of tested it while we were there. You have a live operator on the other end. It works through your mobile phone, and you can just kind of hold your phone up and that person can help direct you to an event, or an attraction, or a ride, or a food stand. But it's cool to see it in action, and it's free.

And it's another way to help people be independent and independently experience the fair. A lot of awesome groups involved to make all these things happen. It really is a coordinated village. It takes all of us, and it takes a lot of pre-planning and a lot of preparation to make it happen.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** I mean, preparation – that is key. We don't want to go put out fires. We want to make sure that we're preventing them. Whether you're hosting an event or you're attending an event, the Boy Scout motto, "Be Prepared," is one to follow.

**EMILY BILLINGS:** We brought this stroller. We actually really would love, like, a medical stroller because he's getting bigger, but this is what works for now. It's his safe space. We brought chewies with us. We brought safe foods, all the things. He uses an AAC device. We use Proloquo2Go. Is the app that is on his device.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** Did you program anything specifically for the Fair today?

**EMILY BILLINGS:** I should have, but we didn't.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** That's okay. Just so you know in the future, on our website, at OCALI, we do have some visual supports that are on there. If you decide to come back you might want to utilize.

**EMILY BILLINGS:** Okay, awesome.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That was parent Emily Billings, who was attending the Fair with her family. You did a really nice job there at the end, Megan, you kind of gently suggested that maybe the next time she could prepare her son's AAC device in advance before coming to the Fair. And AAC for those folks – just because we always want to define our acronyms, right? Is augmentative and alternative communication device. It's a device that folks can use to communicate. You had also mentioned some of the visual supports and told Emily that we have those available and we post them on our website. Can you talk a little bit about what some of those are and what they do?

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** On our website, you can just search "Ohio State Fair." Then select our page on the Fair. On there, we first offer a social narrative specific to visiting the Fair. It's got a nice story about what to expect while you're at the Fair. It's got some good visuals and pictures of different areas at the Fair. At the very end, it also provides a kind of a choose-your-own-adventure where you can fill out for a child kind of what their schedule might look like when they're there. That's a great resource that we developed ...

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That's fun.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** [LAUGHTER]

Yeah. We want them to be prepared. I just got done talking about preparation is key. As a family you might need to do a little bit of that on your own as well.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Absolutely.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** We've also included links to our Grab and Go Resource Gallery of Interventions to a lot of different templates like maybe a First-Then Board or a big one is waiting or taking turns. That can be a challenge when you're waiting for your favorite ride at the fair. Having that visual support could be very helpful. Again, on our resources, you literally just print them and go. You don't have to go searching they're right there.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That's the whole "grab-and-go" part.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** Absolutely.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** I love it.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** We also had the Department of Developmental Disabilities DODD. They were giving away communication boards at the fair. I actually saw them standing in front of the Quiet Room. Those are great because they help people communicate wants and needs by pointing to symbols or pictures that are on that board.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Oh, yeah, right.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** I did see a couple of families take those, so that's a great resource with one of our community partners. They can be very helpful for people who are non-verbal or who simply just prefer to communicate in that way.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** They're all great resources. I think the only problem that we noticed is that we were talking to some people, and they just didn't know about them. It's just part of our ongoing communication efforts that we need to do through the Autism Center through the Family and Community Outreach Center, through all of our different partners, just to let people know that these resources are available. They're free. You can access them ahead of time, you can download them, print them, use them. It really is just a way to help you better prepare even before you arrive at the Fairgrounds for...choosing your own adventure.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** Absolutely. Communication, it's key, whether it's through our website, social media, or the importance of word of mouth, because Emily actually spoke to one of our employees here, and that's kind of how she found out about this Sensory-Friendly Morning. Word of mouth is absolutely key. Families sharing with other families. We talked to a couple of people who are meeting up with other families, professionals sharing with their clients, as well as other professionals. Our colleague, Amy Bixler Coffin, she spoke with another mother, Mandy Roberts, about this.

**AMY BIXLER COFFIN:** If you had a family member or a friend who maybe might have a family member who has sensory differences, would you encourage them to come on this morning and why?

**MANDY ROBERTS:** I absolutely would. Because it's more low key. I think a lot of people get overstimulated, even if they don't have diagnosed sensory issues, and I think it's a nice change to be able to come here and that people are recognizing that it's something that they need to address in public forums like this – in public events. It's not something – I know when I was a kid, it wasn't a thing. We just went, and I think it's important to recognize that people have differences that way and try to accommodate them.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** I love that clip from Mandy Roberts. It just goes back to this whole notion that we recognize that people have differences. Obviously, differences vary. Sensory issues vary. You know, when I was there, Megan, I had the good fortune to talk to a woman who had just come in the Fair, so, actually, she was trying to go to the bathroom. [LAUGHTER] I felt bad for stopping her, but it really was a joy to talk with her. Her name was Netter. She was a former athletic director and educator. When I say that she was a lifelong Fair-goer, I mean that literally, not figuratively. She was taken to the Fair when she was two weeks old, and she has been back every year. It *is* commitment. It is a lifelong commitment. 65 years she's been doing this, and the only one that she missed was during COVID. Netter was gracious enough to stop and talk to us for a little bit, and she shared this little pearl of wisdom about recognizing differences.

**NETTER NEIGHBARGER:** In every walk of life, we need to be able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see how they feel, and how would I feel in that position? There's a lot that you can't see. There's invisible disabilities that people can't see, and you don't know. So be kind to everybody.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** I think what Netter said just hits it. You have to get to know a person,

you have to get to know their individual needs and their preferences. When we talk about support options, they're not going to be the same for everyone.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That brings us back to that  $A + B = C$  equation, Access plus Belonging, equals Community that we talked about at the very beginning of this episode. It's really not that hard. As a host, as an organizer, you can just start with a simple question. What can I do to make this experience more accessible for you? And see where that takes you. Whether it's a fair, a concert, a party, or even just the great outdoors.

**ANDY CHOW:** ODNR has been around since 1949 to help people experience the great outdoors. Going back to the Sensory-Friendly Day, it's creating more access to these things, and ODNR works on constantly trying to make sure that the great outdoors is accessible to everybody. That's a huge part of our mission.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That was Andy Chow from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. And we haven't mentioned it yet, but the ODNR Ohio Department of Natural Resources Park on the fairgrounds is arguably one of the best features of the Ohio State Fair. A natural little oasis built into the fairgrounds. It's a built-in sensory-friendly environment. And if we needed a reminder that we should all be outside as much as possible and visiting our state and national parks what better reminder than to actually be in that kind of space? In the middle of the city in the middle of the Fair. The more we work together to make our parks, our fairs, our events, more accessible, the stronger our communities at large are going to be.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** We want to help everyone do the same work in their own communities because I'm sure a lot of you have attended events that you're thinking there could have been something that could have been improved. We have a great free guide on our website. It's called *Access Plus Belonging Equals Community Event Guide*. If you go to [ocali.org](http://ocali.org) and search the community event guide, you'll find it, and it gives you a lot of great pointers on how to make your events accessible as well.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Absolutely. It's a great resource, and again, one that can help you reflect on your own events and your own offerings and answer this question – what can you do to make them more accessible and help ensure that everyone belongs?

**KELLY D:** Well, my grandson, he's autistic. We thought he might get something out of that. A little easier for him.

**YOUNG MAN:** Butterflies – we had butterflies landed on us.

**PARENT 1:** What's your favorite thing to do at the Fair?

**CHILD 1:** My favorite thing to do is probably the big Ferris wheel.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** Any favorite foods you like here?

**CHILD 1:** I don't really eat here, to be honest.



**CHILD 1:** Fried Twinkies!

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** Oh, fried Twinkies. Yes. [LAUGHTER]

**AMY BIXLER COFFIN:** The big rainbow slide? Do you like slides?

**CHILD 2:** Yes.

**AMY BIXLER COFFIN:** Are you going to get something to eat?

**CHILD 2:** Yeah.

**AMY BIXLER COFFIN:** What do you want?

**CHILD 2:** I wanted cotton candy!

**AMY BIXLER COFFIN:** Cotton Candy!

**CHILD 3:** Well, there's this little, stream tables that got water and a bunch of, like, crayfish. and help my like a...there a larva to a bug?

**PARENT 3:** And you like to go kayaking over there?

**CHILD 3:** I like the kayaking pool and everything.

**JESS WEST:** So, we want the Ohio State Fair to be for all Ohioans. The Ohio State Fair is such a big celebration of all that Ohio has to offer. We want everyone to be able to experience that. I mean, it's not a celebration of Ohio if all Ohioans can't come. We want to make sure that everyone's coming out and they're having a good experience, and they're enjoying the celebration.

[MUSIC]

**SIMON BUEHRER:** It's not a celebration of Ohio if all Ohioans can't come. I love that statement from Jess West. That really sums up the access and inclusion that we're all working towards. I definitely enjoyed the celebration, and our visit to the Fair. It was a great day.

And it's been a lot of fun working with you on this podcast episode, Megan.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** You, too. You know, after we get done recording, we kind of went our separate ways. We didn't really get a chance to chat. I just want to know what's your favorite food? What did you have this year?

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Oh, good one! This year, I was really looking forward to the pickle lemonade.

This was one of the new features that they announced this year. Because I love pickles. I love lemons. And I have to say, at least the one that I tried was a little disappointing. It was kind of not very pickly, not very lemony. It was just sort of a watered-down mess. What about you?

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** I'm not adventurous at all. Pickles are not my cup of tea. I like to just stick with classics – corn dogs, funnel cake.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** The classics, they're classics for a reason. I'm glad you got to enjoy those. The good news is the Fair is coming back. It'll be back again next year, and we'll keep working towards building access and inclusion with the Fair, with all of our partners. We'll have the opportunity to again, enjoy both traditional and some of the more off-the-wall foods and beverages.

You've been listening to *Connecting the Dots* podcast series from the Autism Center at OCALI. You can find all of OCALI's podcast episodes at [ocali.org/podcasts](http://ocali.org/podcasts). Or wherever you get your podcasts. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. We've talked about a lot of different resources throughout this podcast episode, and we will have direct links to all of them on our website as well. You can find out more about the Autism Center at OCALI, again, [ocali.org/center/autism](http://ocali.org/center/autism).

This has been a delight. I'm Simon Buehrer.

**MEGAN TROWBRIDGE:** I'm Megan Trowbridge. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.