

OCALI | Podcast – From my Perspective

Belonging Series – Contributing to a Vibrant Community

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JEN BAVRY: Welcome to From My Perspective. This is OCALI's Family and Community Outreach Center Podcast. In these podcasts, you will hear from people with disabilities, their families, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. You'll hear about everyday life, their passions, their interests, their opinions. You'll be inspired. You might laugh or cry. But most importantly, you will better understand what life is like from our perspective.

I am your host Jen Bavry, Program Director of the OCALI Family and Community Outreach Center. This episode offers a look into a community's revitalization, including innovative initiatives to empower people with disabilities through the efforts of two social purpose enterprises, Art & Clay On Main, and Square Seven Coffee House. Surrounded by the lively sounds on a busy weekday morning at Art & Clay, Square Seven, Mitsi and Temple share how their focus on providing opportunities and promoting independence contributes to bringing about a vibrant community where people lead fulfilling lives and make meaningful contributions.

Welcome Mitsi and Temple to OCALI's From My Perspective.

TEMPLE: Thank you.

MITSI: Thanks so much for having us.

JEN BAVRY: I am so thrilled to be with the two of you to learn more about and to be able to share with others the outreach efforts the two local businesses, Art & Clay On Main and Square Seven Coffee House that you're engaging and empowering people with disabilities in your community. Maybe we can first start with just a little background if you want to share more about Art & Clay On Main and Square Seven Coffee House and your role with both.

TEMPLE: Absolutely. Well, thank you for having us. Yes, Art & Clay On Main and Square Seven Coffee House are social purpose enterprises of the Fairfield County Board of Developmental Disabilities in Lancaster, Ohio. Art & Clay On Main is a paint your own pottery studio that was started well over 15 years ago by a local entrepreneur, and she was ready to close up and try something new in her life. And at the time our superintendent, John Pekar decided, you know, what a shame what.

It's such a Vibrant business, and we hate to see any business in downtown Lancaster close. But also, he really thought that there might be some opportunity there. He didn't quite know what that opportunity was at the time, but he did manage to convince the board that this might be

something that had a lot of different legs are moving parts to it and that they should further explore.

So to make a very long story short, it was really sort of a ready, fire, aim operation. But the Fairfield County Board of DD did acquire Art & Clay On Main. And at the time, one of the first things that we did was move a group of artists with developmental disabilities into the space. They were known as the Blue Shoe Artists. They were already functioning as an independent art group, but they were really looking for studio space. And so that's the first thing that happened.

We also resurrected the paint your own pottery business and opened that to the public. And over the years we kind of went through a lot of metamorphosis. So we started doing art lessons here. We started inviting different groups of people with developmental disabilities into the space. And of course then kept that retail aspect going as well.

A few years after that we added the coffee shop. And with that, we started working with our job development arm at Fairfield DD on implementing an internship program that would teach job readiness skills and some soft skills to people who were really just beginning to explore the realm of possibility for employment. We've gone through a lot of growth since then. Blue Shoe Art has expanded to the point where they are not a group of artists with developmental disabilities, but they are now an artist in residence group that includes people in the community with and without disabilities.

The internship program is still in full swing. But on top of that, we now employ at Art & Clay and Square Seven a permanent workforce of people with and without developmental disabilities. And I have to tell you too that our mission statement at the county board is to bring about a vibrant community where people lead fulfilling lives and make meaningful contributions. And at no place in our mission statement is the word disability. But there is, very prominently at the beginning of that mission statement, the phrase vibrant community.

We like to think that the growth that's happened in historic downtown Lancaster happened if not because of us definitely alongside of us. In the last nine or 10 years, we have seen immense growth downtown. At the time when Mitsi and I both started down here, we were kind of the only game in town. The carpets rolled up downtown at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. We were only open, what, five days a week, sometimes only from noon to 4:00. And now it's a seven-day a week operation that's operating well over 70 hours a week.

MITSI: Temple I are really about the only two people left that remember what it was like down here in the early days.

TEMPLE: Tumble weeds.

MITSI: You could hear the crickets chirping.

TEMPLE: And now there's really-- I think there's only one vacancy in downtown Lancaster. So.

MITSI: We have watched it really be sustainable over the last decade-- the growth be sustainable. I mean, it's continued to grow. It's growing today.

TEMPLE: And what's been really cool is that with our mission, a lot of people are like, how does the county board own a social purpose enterprise? But for us, by having that part of our mission statement be realizing that we're only as good and as healthy as the community in which we operate, that a perfect explanation, is that we've been able to have a front row seat at the resurrection of downtown. And also, we have an inclusive retail space that, I mean, where else would you want to be if you're trying to drive home a message?

JEN BAVRY: That's absolutely wonderful. I love how you talk about a vibrant community. You two definitely created that. You mentioned that Art & Clay On Main and Square Seven are social purpose enterprise. What is that model?

TEMPLE: Sure. For us it's meant an inclusive environment where people are creating alongside one another, where people are employed alongside one another, treated equally, having equal experiences, and sort of hiding in plain sight. Now, like I said, we started out on housing programs for people with developmental disabilities. But as we've evolved and our outlook on that has evolved, then so too has the goings on within the walls of Art & Clay and Square Seven. So I'll let Mitsi expand a little bit on how we fulfill that purpose.

MITSI: So I think it means something different to everybody that is doing a social enterprise. For us, what it means today-- and you'll hear me say the word evolve, because the internship that we offer is evolved, our employment initiatives have evolved, employment responsibilities here have evolved. And with that evolution, what's been forcing it is the extreme growth that we have seen here at Art & Main Square Seven over the last decade. And it's a very exciting growth.

But when we were seeing in so many different changes over just maybe a one or two-year period with something that we were doing this internship, and it was becoming confusing for the people who were facilitating it. And I remember saying to my boss, what does this mean? What are we doing? What is the true definition of what we are doing today?

TEMPLE: What's the objective?

MITSI: We see it come from so many different directions, and sometimes the left hand's not talking to the right hand, and we have so many different people with so many different sectors of the agency involved, and I feel like they weren't always communicating on the same initiative. And he wrote down for me, we're providing opportunities and we're promoting independence.

TEMPLE: Period.

MITSI: That's it. That's it. And that has been--

TEMPLE: Your mantra.

MITSI: --in my head for the last six years, and it helps me in navigating everything everything I do for the initiative of the social enterprise.

TEMPLE: And that's where I think Mitsi has taken the internship program and really made it work to the advantage of everybody involved.

MITSI: What we start with the internship is, in general, on paper, it is a 10-week opportunity for job skill training. They're working directly one on one with a job coach. They're working in our space. So they are also being coached by my staff, who are well trained already by me. And they're getting the opportunity to interact with customers and be part of a team.

They might also be-- we encourage them strongly, from day one, to be responsible for keeping their own schedule, to setting up the transportation, and showing up to work on time, and being appropriately dressed. Sometimes there has to be some grooming coaching. All these skills, we're teaching them not just to learn the skills but how to be competitive.

You want to see improvement from day one. And so we're constantly reevaluating. We meet regularly with the individual. If their team needs to be involved, their support staff or their families or whoever they need to have part of their support team to be successful. And we conference regularly about where to go next-- what's the next initiative for the next couple of weeks.

And then it also gives us an opportunity for this person to tell us where they think they are, and what they like, and what they don't like. Because I feel very, very strongly with my staff in general-- look, it's a small business. Everybody has to be able to do everything, and every task has to be accomplished. The bathrooms have to be clean.

And there's just so much busy work. We want to deep cleaning at the end of the day. Shelves have to be restocked, customer service has to be top notch, and everybody needs to be able to do everything. Because in a small business, you can't afford to have pockets of people who only do this or only do that.

But in getting to know anybody, you're going to realize what gets them really excited, what areas do they really like, where is their passion. And--

TEMPLE: That's the key to success.

MITSI: --it may not have-- because I know how I do things that I'm not enjoying. I don't do them well. And so you have to find a nice middle ground where everything's still being accomplished and everybody has to clean the bathrooms whether they like it or not. Rarely will you have somebody say, I love to clean the bathrooms.

TEMPLE: And by the way, Mitsi and I both started working together when we were what, 15, 16 years old? We fought over who was cleaning the bathrooms back then.

MITSI: For sure. That's for sure.

TEMPLE: We both worked in a fast food restaurant together.

MITSI: You touched it last. Anyway, you're the closest to it. Anyway, but those things have to be done and they have to be done well. I have very high expectations for all of my staff for how we present this place to the community. And with getting all of those things accomplished, I still have the flexibility to be able to send somebody in a direction where I see strength and where I see them getting excited and--

TEMPLE: Interest.

MITSI: --proud of themselves. And that's what passion is all about, right? So if they can get excited about what they're doing, they can get excited about coming to work. And then all the other things fall in line. Like, hey, I'm getting money for it. And then they start spending the money and see how nice it is to have that money, and then that's just another fuel to the fire of self-motivation and pride in employment.

TEMPLE: And positive reinforcement. There's a lot of positive reinforcement. And I think that probably one of the most beautiful things about this internship is that, number one, it's person centered. So Mitsi and her staff are constantly checking in with this individual, like she said, about what do you like, what do you not like, what's the passion. But also it's happening in a public setting where individuals are-- they're not in a sheltered environment at all.

MITSI: Well, you also don't want to see-- you want to see everybody wearing the same staff shirts. You want to see everybody-- and by the way, when I say the same, this is an art studio, so I have about 27 different designs, and they get to choose from that. Not everybody's wearing the same black shirt.

TEMPLE: They're all very cool. They're very cool.

MITSI: Yeah. So I want everybody to be comfortable, and I want to create a vibe that is comfortable. It needs to be seamless. And so that's why it's important that they're introduced in every area of the business and that the skills that they're learning are transferable to a lot of other opportunities that they will find interesting. And--

TEMPLE: Sometimes they might even just find out, I don't like this. You know, we've had--

MITSI: Oh, that happens all the time.

TEMPLE: --interns here that have been here like two weeks, and been like--

MITSI: Peace out.

TEMPLE: Yeah, I'm out of here. I would like to work in the parks. And by the way, once we found that out-- we had one intern-- actually, it's been like eight or nine years now-- who said, I want to work outside. Got him set up with the Parks Department, and he's been employed there for darn near eight or nine years. So that happens all the time.

MITSI: But working with somebody, you're going to get to know a lot about them. So even if an intern is here for four hours a week for 10 weeks, you get to know a lot about that person. It's for exclusive hours with somebody a week. You're getting to know them hopefully. Hopefully.

TEMPLE: They're part of the fabric.

MITSI: But that's just speaking on the internship. And during the pandemic and up to today, it's been very hard to facilitate. Unfortunately with the pandemic, we have multiple people on staff who happen to have disabilities who also are part of a very vulnerable population. So their families were not comfortable with them coming back. We actually have a gal here today for the first time in 15 months.

TEMPLE: She is excited too.

MITSI: Well, I'm excited. I was celebrating pretty loudly when I first got here today. And I've been talking to her throughout the last year, waiting pretty impatiently for this day to happen for her. But it's something to celebrate. She's gaining some independence back. And anybody who wants to work should be working-- we should be working. So dang the pandemic, it's left vibrations throughout the workforce that are going to be felt I think for years.

And I think that also, in reference to the internship, a lot of people that hear kind of on the surface that we do this internship, they automatically assume that it's like a long-term job interview. This is not going to turn into a permanent position at Art & Clay, because if it's a successful internship, and most of them are, they really like it here, and they want to stay.

TEMPLE: You can have some broken hearts.

MITSI: And so we have found out that it's very important to everybody's emotions and to everybody's goals seeking that they hear this right up front. And with that said, yes, I have hired some interns. Because what happens is I might be hiring at the very time that they are finishing their internship or have already finished it and are still looking for permanent employment with job developers.

So they see a posting or somebody on their team or somebody in their family sees a posting. Or maybe at their internship I think it's such a good fit, I will say, just like I would anybody in here painting or stopping in for coffee regularly, I'm like, listen, you really like this place, I know it. And we all vibe pretty well, right? So just so you know, I'm hiring. If you wanted to throw your hat in the ring, this is what you need to do.

And I would say, over the years, I couldn't even tell you how many dozens of interns we've had, but I could count on one hand the number that I've hired permanently.

TEMPLE: Having said that, the success rate's been pretty high. So a lot of those individuals and those interns that have been hired have been here three, four, five, six, seven, eight years.

JEN BAVRY: I really-- what I really appreciate what you're saying is that even if it's an intern or you're hiring folks, I mean everyone is equal, and they are all able to contribute in their own way to the success of Art & Clay and Square Seven. So I just am loving what you guys are saying.

TEMPLE: And the other thing is too that I think it's really important, and this we've said since day one, is that 80-85% of the customers, they have no idea that this place is owned and operated by the Fairfield County Board DD. And that's the way we like it. Because, again, it's about hiding in plain sight. It's about, to be truly inclusive that nobody is excluded. Nobody's focused in on. There's no spotlight on anybody.

And that's also the beauty of a true successful working relationship. As Mitsi said, people aren't working and interning here because we've got an obligation to do that for--

MITSI: Quota to fill.

TEMPLE: --or a quota to fill. I mean, it has to be a good fit.

MITSI: And we have people who want to work and they need some polishing skills. And I love that DD supports me in being able to have the flexibility to make those decisions, when I meet these people that there's no criteria I have to follow. Now, we have a employment ISC working--
- Individual support coordinator--

TEMPLE: And that's our jargon, by the way, for caseworker is individual support coordinator.

MITSI: So we have a gal who's wonderful, and she gets referrals all the time. She'll get them from OOD. She'll get them from other ISCs. And she first decides with this individual if this is something that they've made this decision independently. And they're not being told and sent in a direction that really is not in their wishes.

We want to make sure that we're promoting independence. And we're just--

TEMPLE: And that it's person-centered. And that's why I said, Mitsi's had people in here before, two weeks in it was very apparent they did not want to be here.

MITSI: Yeah. That's not what our initiative is. Person-centered is not somebody else making the decisions for you. It is-- we do have a group of people that will help facilitate somebody who has those independent desires and goals. We help make that happen.

TEMPLE: And it's gone the other way too. We've had individuals in here whose parents have said, they're really not--

MITSI: Oh, countless. Countless.

TEMPLE: They're not ready to work. They have no reason to work.

MITSI: Two of my permanent staff.

TEMPLE: And one of our permanent staff that we were out to lunch with yesterday celebrating a birthday, darn near a year and a half you tried to get him in here.

MITSI: Because we learn from our employees what works best for each individual. And it's so very different. So each time I'm learning something that will help me go to the next one and maybe open my mind more and help me make stronger choices. And that's what it's all about, right? That's what we all do.

JEN BAVRY: That's fabulous. I do have one question. How have these partnerships and the work that you're doing through this social enterprise been able to expand beyond your doors?

MITSI: Absolutely. Do you want to start?

TEMPLE: Yeah. Well, I would say, first of all, the beauty of being in a small town, Jennifer, is that-- and I say small, we're probably 50,000 people-- we're definitely in a you scratch our back we'll scratch your back situation in everything that we do. And so our community partnerships are invaluable to everything that Fairfield DD represents. Again, we try not to be an in your face, this is how it's done type of organization. And yet at the same time, we've been able to very quietly say, this is how it's done or this is how it should be done. And so we hope that we are leading by example when it comes to that.

And the other employment initiatives that we do and training, we operate Project Search out of Fairfield Medical Center. Which is a year-long internship program where high school seniors are rotated throughout 16 different departments at Fairfield Medical Center. We have individuals that are permanently employed here that were graduates of that program. So we are able to make sure that at least laterally within our own organization that our mission-driven organization messages are being illustrated throughout everything that we do.

But I also think there's some really cool things that happen. We have an individual that's permanently employed here who happens to receive services that does all the radio ads. So on a very quiet scale, that individual's on the radio, and we're doing full paid advertisement, 30-second ads.

MITSI: He has a remarkable voice. If opportunities have been presented to him a long time ago, he would be a sportscaster.

TEMPLE: Right, right. But in that quiet way, we're leading by example I guess.

MITSI: Yeah. And in terms of partnerships, let me take a different approach also, in that I currently have 10 physical partnerships with different agencies and organizations and now one private entity in the community, where we do what we call a voucher system. We work with the juvenile court system. We work with job and family. And you can imagine that they both have clients that a creative outlet would benefit, right?

TEMPLE: Or family time.

MITSI: So there's Family Adult Children's First Council. We've been working with them for years and years. Temple first established that when she was GM here. And we do so much business with them now in this voucher partnership, that they're sending a family in at least every week. And throughout the pandemic, they switched that voucher to include our pogo kits, which are paint at home kits.

So what it is is they're putting people together, maybe it's with a caseworker, maybe it's with--

TEMPLE: A weekly hour with mom that they haven't seen.

MITSI: And there's the program at the juvenile court. So there's teen girls in crisis is one of the programs that we do a voucher with. And they have a mentor who comes in specifically with a group of girls who don't-- maybe they necessarily aren't friends, maybe they don't get along at all. But they're coming in together and having sort of like a fellowship. But they're--

TEMPLE: Using art.

MITSI: --using art as a creative outlet. And I've been told that the conversations, just the organic conversations they're having while they are just almost mindlessly creating, their guards coming down, because they're using their creativity and they're not working so hard to put up barriers. And they're just having these great conversations. And so we facilitate that for, like I said, 10 different organizations.

TEMPLE: And I do want to touch on that too, Jennifer, because I want to make sure that Mitsi's getting the credit and her staff's getting the credit that they are due. With all of these social purposes that we're discussing, like I said at the very beginning of the interview, this is a very unique business model. Because this is a business, and there were times 10 or 11 years ago where we might have done \$150,000 in a year. Mitsi and her staff can do that in a month in December.

So as all of this is going on, this business is growing. The offerings here are growing. So yes, it is a paint your own pottery store, but there's wet clay classes, there's art instructions.

MITSI: There's all abilities summer camps and all ability art classes.

TEMPLE: There's gallery space on the walls where our artist in residence program, which I had mentioned earlier, has blossomed into it's own entity. They have art shows here. The Square Seven Coffee House offers a full custom-crafted drink menu, with just about anything you could possibly want.

MITSI: Which, by the way, is a really great thing to train individuals on learning how to follow a recipe and multitasking, because it can get very, very busy. And then they can learn some register skills as well.

TEMPLE: While all these great things are happening that warm the cockles of your heart, the doors are staying open because Mitsi and her team run a very successful business here, they

fulfill a really cool niche in the community and in Central Ohio, and, like I said, the success of this business has, at the very least, been fuel on the fire to the success of downtown Lancaster as it's continued to grow. She won't tell you that, but I will. She's running a heck of a business here.

JEN BAVRY: I am so glad you shared that. Because I agree just based off everything you just said. I usually-- I was going to ask, what's on the horizon for Art & Clay On Main and Square Seven, but I feel like you guys are so full with all these things that you've got going on, I wonder what else you can add in for the future?

TEMPLE: But wait, there's more.

[LAUGHTER]

MITSI: The post pandemic world for every business right now, or small business in particular, because there's such a feeling of struggling to survive. So looking ahead to post-pandemic, we have evolved so much in the last year that our business looks completely different, completely different.

TEMPLE: And I have to tell you, when she mentioned those pogo kits, that's one thing that she did in this past year that has blown people away, especially our commissioners who can't quit talking about it. She came up with this ingenious idea called pogo kits, which people could come to take out pottery. So she would put together--

MITSI: So they can put together a custom pogo here and take it home with them if they don't feel comfortable staying or if just one person from the family wants to come and select their pottery, and select their colors, and we put everything together and go. So one person picks it up. Currently we have a small selection, but we do have several pogo kits online that they can completely order from the comfort and safety of their home, and we have curbside pickup.

TEMPLE: For the coffee house too.

MITSI: Yep. We're starting a new initiative with project-driven all-ability art classes this summer, where we've always done like a week long camp, and I was just afraid to make that happen this summer. Last year we had to completely eliminate them, and that was really sad because there aren't a ton of all-ability offerings for kids for the summer and especially for art classes. So we love to be able to offer them. We love to make them innovative and new creativity every single year.

But we also have a wonderful partnership with our parks department who all last summer and then again this summer, they have confirmed to giving us a spot on Wednesday evenings.

TEMPLE: Open air.

MITSI: Under beautiful shade trees right by the pond.

TEMPLE: In our park.

MITSI: Next to the tennis courts in our biggest park in town right by our mountain. That lessens the fear of an indoor exposure. You're going to be around people, but it's open air. And who doesn't love going to the park on a beautiful Saturday morning?

TEMPLE: So I have to tell you that, because this is my job, to tell you that all of this information is available to anybody at any time. So Mitsi does a bang up job of managing her social media. She's on Instagram. She's on Twitter. She's on Facebook. Of course, you can--

MITSI: Tiktok.

TEMPLE: Oh, yeah. Doing the Tik Tok videos. That's the beauty of having a young staff. We think that we're younger than we are, but really the young staff is helping us learn a lot of that cool stuff. But of course artandclayonmain.com as well as fairfielddd.com you can get all that information as well. So there's virtually no way to contact us. I'll warn you, if you call us by phone, as you've noticed, we talk a lot. So if you don't have time to talk to us, you might want to check us out on the website or social media.

JEN BAVRY: Thank you for sharing all of that, because that was my final question to you guys is how do people connect with you. So I appreciate the fact that you shared the website and that you are on social media, because I think this is going to be fabulous for people to learn more.

TEMPLE: Come order one of the pogo kits. I mean, we have a lot of people come through Lancaster on the way to Hocking Hills. You know, you could drive through here, pick up a pogo kit, take it down to Old Man's Cave--

MITSI: Drop it off on your way.

TEMPLE: Drop it off on your way back back out of town. And yeah, there's a lot to see here.

JEN BAVRY: I love it. Any final thoughts as we're wrapping up? Anything else to add?

TEMPLE: We just-- I would be remiss if I didn't say thank you to you and to OCALI for the work that you're doing as well. Our partnerships throughout Central Ohio, all of those relationships are very important to us, and we certainly appreciate you spreading the word and letting people know about our venture and adventures down here in Lancaster.

JEN BAVRY: Wonderful. Thank you both. I am, again, just excited to be able to share this information.

TEMPLE: Well, get on down here. We can't wait to meet you in person.

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JEN BAVRY: Thank you for listening to this episode of From My Perspective. If you would like to learn more about these two social purpose enterprises, please visit artandclayonmain.com. And please take a moment to visit OCALI at ocali.org. That is o-c-a-l-i dot o-r-g to learn more about our resources, including other episodes of From My Perspective as well as OCALI's Inspiring Change Podcast.

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