

OCALI | Podcast – Episode 24

It's Really about Living your Moments Well with Other People

[RADIO TUNING] [MUSIC PLAYING]

SIMON BUEHRER: Welcome to Inspiring Change, from OCALI, our forum of stories and connections from our ongoing work of inspiring change and promoting access for people with disabilities. I'm Simon Buehrer.

JILL MAYS: I know now with disabilities and when people are writing plans and they're asking people, what are your dreams or aspirations? If there is no experience there, if there's no knowledge there, how do you even know?

DANYETTA NAJOLI: The person's quality of life is almost in direct correlation to the person supporting them in terms of how much they will go and stretch and think.

TIM VOGT: If you're in the space of being interested in building a more inclusive world, either through your work or through your family or through your community or for yourself, remember that strategically, it's not all going to happen at once. Right? It's going to be these small steps.

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SIMON BUEHRER: When we talk about building and enriching stronger and more inclusive communities, there are, of course, lots of different ideas and theories and formulas for how to cultivate, nurture, and sustain them most effectively. These efforts can certainly be challenging, complicated, even difficult. But what if they weren't? What if our collective efforts as professionals, as parents, as self advocates, supporters, and allies, could be strengthened and improved simply by being more familiar with each other?

What if we could build better connections and networks and relationships simply by being more involved and participating in more activities together. Could it really be that simple? Well, that's exactly the framework that Tim Vogt, Danyetta Najoli, and Jill Mays set out to discuss and explore in a recent conversation.

Tim and Danyetta both work for Starfire, a Cincinnati-based organization that has been building better lives for people with disabilities since 1993. And Jill Mays is a development and community relations coordinator for PSU in Lebanon, Ohio. Tim Vogt gets things started.

TIM VOGT: This is going to be a lot of fun, but it's fun in a scientific way. So typically I-- like data, it makes me crazy because I'm kind of like, we're not just numbers, people. We're human beings with hearts and souls. You know me, right? This is like my kryptonite. I can't take it when we get reduced to numbers, right?

And I, in particular, feel like people with disabilities sometimes accidentally get reduced to numbers, and it drives me up the wall. I do, however, think that we can learn using data patterns and science if we're really aware that it's not just all data patterns and science. It's also there's some magic, right? I mean, there's some things that draw people together that are just, I don't know, love, friendship, affection, you know?

And we don't even know where some of that comes from. But what lately we've been studying are some of the building blocks of some of that stuff and some of the psychology and some of the interesting research around that. This isn't just for people with disabilities. This research is for all human beings. So we're starting from inclusion with this research, and we'll get into it, but I just wanted to set the stage of we're going to talk some data here.

And in particular, I think it might be helpful for people who are in our work to have some really solid tools that there's more than these things. But these are just some really nice little ways that they can go about taking some steps toward innovation that raise the odds that people with disabilities might be known more in their communities.

They might get to have a few more relationships. So it's also relevant, I think, to families and to neighbors. If there's neighbors that live around a person with a disability they can say, how can I help this person get more connected? These kind of things might work. So we're going to talk about three principles.

The first one is the familiarity principle, and we'll get into what that is in a second. The second one is called high-quality connections research. And the third is called the shared activities principle. The familiarity principle, OK? It's real simple. It just states that we, as human beings -- you're going to be shocked -- we prefer, in life, people and things that we are more familiar with.

If you see somebody walking around on your way to work every day, you see the same person, you'll end up liking them more over time. We really need this in cases where people might be divided, right? So if it's politics or if it's some sort of diversity barrier or if it's something that's like, I don't know, in this case, people with disabilities that aren't necessarily seen very often or something like that, that this idea of being more familiar with each other might help.

And I guess my first question is, we're going to start again with the human level. This is for all human beings. This is not special to disability, right? So I mean, what do you guys think about this? Jill, are there things in your life that you feel that you are familiar with and you like them more? Tell me about that.

JILL MAYS: Absolutely. I mean, basically, bringing it down, it's your comfort zone. And when I read through that material and thought about it, I had two different thoughts and one really is representation matters. You know? Whether it's people with disabilities or people of different ethnicity, it makes a difference if we see people around us or things around us. It does. It makes us more comfortable and more familiar.

So representation really does matter, whether it's in media or just in our lives. And the other thought that I had about that was the other side of the coin is it really limits people's choices and lives sometimes because if we are asking either ourselves or others to choose activities or vacations or experiences, you're limited to what you've already experienced. I mean, you don't really know anything outside your experience.

TIM VOGT: Oh, yeah. That's important.

JILL MAYS: I know now with disabilities and when people are writing plans and they're asking people, what are your dreams or aspirations? If there is no experience there, if there's no knowledge there, how do you even know? I know for myself when I was in high school and when you're going to college and they ask you to choose a major, I had no idea what was out there. I had no idea of the different choices. At that point in my life I didn't even know what a social worker was. There were so many vocational choices and educational choices that I had no idea what they were.

TIM VOGT: Right. So you were unfamiliar with even the options that were out there. And in the familiarity principle, that would say, well, if you're unfamiliar with it, it doesn't feel safe. Right? That's not an option, or I don't even know about it.

JILL MAYS: Right.

TIM VOGT: Danyetta, what about you? What does this mean on a personal level in Danyetta's life? What are you more familiar with, feel safer with that you just ... you came to be that way?

DANYETTA NAJOLI: Yeah. I love that question, and also reading up on what that was about, the mere exposure effect. I love that it takes multiple times to be exposed to something before you say, OK, wait. This is safe. This is friendly. This is OK. So I think about a couple of things all the way back to when I was growing up in Harlem and how I used to see a lady. I never knew her name, but I would see her walk through our neighborhood in the middle of Harlem.

She was probably just maybe coming back from work or going to work. I just remembered that she seemed to float through the neighborhood. She seemed to be unscathed by whatever was going on. And that kind of thing, actually, that visual has stuck with me, and it made me aspire to just be like that person without even knowing her. But it was because I kept seeing her and I kept seeing what she may have represented, just someone that was just positive and just moving through life.

And so that's on a real very tangential way that this mere exposure effect has an impact on me. It can also be something as simple as trying new foods, you know? I didn't grow up eating avocado or blueberries, for instance. But then as I became more interested in my health, I wanted to try new foods. I met with nutritionists, and lo and behold, these were the things. Walnuts, blueberries, avocado.

And so you get used to it over time, and I got used to it. So now I love a good guac and chips whereas maybe even two years ago, I would never have even thought about it. So on a very basic level, those are two things. And the last thing that I will share is around soccer.

Soccer was not a sport that I was familiar with at all until I married my husband, who is from Kenya, and that's all that-- that's their main recreation. I went from not knowing about it to having exposure to it and then, lo and behold, coaching my daughter in it and going to games and looking at the World Cup finals. So that's like a small personal example.

TIM VOGT: Right. I mean, this is exactly it. I'm not as familiar with it. I don't know the rules. I never played it. And all of a sudden now, little bit, little bit, little bit. I'm speaking the lingo. I'm buying the tickets to go see the soccer team. I'm helping coach. Who knows, right? But I mean, of course. We get more familiar, more comfortable. Jill, so you were talking a little bit about what if we give people with disabilities options that they're not familiar with, right?

So is anybody here surprised knowing this familiarity principle? I mean, should we even be surprised if somebody says, no, I don't really want to get a job. Or no, I don't really want to leave this building. If it says that it feels safer with things you're familiar with, how do you go about helping somebody? I mean, why would it even be important for somebody to be familiar with life outside, say, Starfire's day program? Does that make sense as a question?

JILL MAYS: I think that you need to offer people the opportunities to get different experiences, to see different experiences. If it's in jobs, maybe do some job shadowing or something like that or just even take them into different venues. But I know one of the things that we are doing more of now is offering more varied experiences. Last year, the last couple years was really hard, and it was pretty isolating.

But I know that we had a group of a few guys that went and cut down their own Christmas tree and we had a couple groups of people when it snowed last year that they went sledding and they'd never been sledding before. Or they went and flew kites, and they'd never done that before.

And there was this attitude some of the time of, well, they won't be able to do that or, is this really safe? These were just marvelous experiences that people were very thrilled to be able to do it and be independent in doing these things. I think that you have to offer a lot of diversity and experience in life as well as vocation as well as things at home.

TIM VOGT: Yeah. So I mean, your abs-- you kind of mentioned that it's almost like an absence of familiarity, right? And so you're talking about just initial, quick experiences that build a little bit more familiarity, a little bit more comfort, a little bit more safety. So when people say that's impossible or that's not safe, they might actually be right because they're thinking of someone living a life that they haven't lived to this point.

But we can take a next step is what you're saying. We can try something. We can see how it goes. That is possible. That is safe, right? And so it's helpful for us to think about that, which is

a, whew, well, how would we get a first step and just get a little bit familiar with this, right? That's cool. Danyetta, what about you? I mean, how have you seen this? What do you think about when you hear Jill say that?

DANYETTA NAJOLI: Yeah. I mean, I was thinking about the poverty of experiences that I know that many people with disabilities have and just knowing that people may not be able to say, oh, I want to do this, this, or this. Like to be concrete and know exactly because if they don't have a reservoir to pull from, it's hard to know. The other thing that I think about is people that are supporting others to the extent that they themselves are open to exploring, like as a staff person.

I think there's a direct correlation. I've always felt that way. The person's quality of life is almost in direct correlation to the person supporting them in terms of how much they will go and stretch and think, and it's a process. To me, like you were saying, Tim, it's like maybe it's a step.

It doesn't-- because I know for me, sometimes I do think it's got to be something big, huge, and this huge thing, but it doesn't have to be that it. It could simply be, I talked to someone today. We introduced someone and they had a conversation and it was great, and that matters because that's a small step in a big goal of having relationships that are positive.

TIM VOGT: Oh, thank you for saying it. And I mean, we have to just stop, take a deep breath, and under-- for me, what you just said, Danyetta, is so important. I think what you're pointing to a little bit is that our familiarity as service workers, as supporters, as staff, maybe as family members, maybe as neighbors, our own familiarity and comfort and preferences and likes really needs to be factored into the equation. Right?

I mean, seriously, if I've been trained to stay in my building and to do work in my building, of course I'm going to be a little nervous. But that we are actually maybe filtering our likes and our preferences and our comfort on to the options that we're offering for people with disabilities for their lives, right? And I think being aware of that is one thing that I'm really interested in is, how do we actually take a step back and be like, oh, wow, OK. This is about me, too.

It's not just about the person with a disability. It's also about me and what I'm familiar with and how do I get better. So I'm really curious about that. How have you all gotten better and more familiar and more comfortable with the kind of work that you've been doing, that you hope to do? I mean, what kind of tips would you offer?

DANYETTA NAJOLI: I would love for people to be trained and to learn continually and know that it's not just a static set way to be, but you actually have to continue to learn and grow. And whatever it is for you that gets you into that space of learning continually, then go for it. And you might already be doing that in another area of your life, and that's the fun part about it. You could see, where else am I learning and growing all the time anyway? Personal coaching, life coaching, growth and development work, and that is truly a thing of, you are always stretching. You are always getting ready to get into the water from the boat.

TIM VOGT: Jill, what do you think?

JILL MAYS: I think that education is a huge piece because I think that you need to be open minded and education, I think, really opens your mind. But you have to be willing to try new things.

TIM VOGT: If you're in the space of being interested in building a more inclusive world, either through your work or through your family or through your community or for yourself, remember that strategically, it's not all going to happen at once, right? It's going to be these small steps that you heard -- that we heard you all talk about. And then if we do that over and over and over and over, then we get more and more familiar, more and more comfortable with each other, with other people.

People get more comfortable with us if we see each other over and over and over. I wanted to get out of the familiarity principle and into high-quality connections. And I think this is fascinating. Short moments within the context of a long possible relationship. A relationship might last your whole life. It might last just, like, a year. It might just be on a project. Whatever. But there are moments of connection within however long that relationship is.

That's the building blocks of relationships. We're talking about 10 minutes, 5 minutes, 20 minutes. People start to see each other as almost better because of these little high-quality connections, and it actually ties us to organizations and communities the more that we foster that because it builds feelings of safety and trust. There's three qualities of high quality connections that we want to keep in mind. One is that they are respectful. I feel respected.

The second is that I feel helped. Whatever I'm trying to do, I feel like somebody has given me assistance, right? And I judge that as high quality and more connected to them. And the third is that there's a playful or creative aspect, and that it takes us out of the roles that we're in. So coworkers, if they play together, they see each other on a more human level. Or people that are, say, teachers and students. If they do a project together or something that's more playful, they'll start to see each other as people rather than as these power dynamics.

JILL MAYS: For me, what came to mind -- and actually, for me, there was a lot of overlap in all three of these principals. And so I would think of a story and then I'd be like, well, that applies to this and this. But just thinking over the past couple of years, I've gotten more involved in some community groups, mostly virtual and by Zoom or whatever, but working towards some activism, some community projects, volunteering, would touch in with each other and be working for a certain cause.

It was very affirming with people because there were a lot of people from different backgrounds and even different political views or belief systems. We came together for certain causes and all the differences went to the wayside because the connections that we had were very supportive and helpful to each other, and that's where the focus was.

TIM VOGT: So that's really interesting, that last part that we talked about with the principle of it's a little bit about play, and that takes us out of those roles, right? So it doesn't have to just be power dynamics, but it also might be identities that we set. Right? So you're saying maybe we politically don't agree or maybe we come from different backgrounds, but because we are working on this thing together, this play, this collaboration, this creative endeavor, we ended up setting those things aside. They became almost like secondary identities.

DANYETTA NAJOLI: One thing I was thinking of is just in an informal mentoring that I've been doing with a couple of people that's in my community. We're not talking very long periods of time, but it's a way that we've connected because for different reasons. Because ... mine is more like a personal connection. I really thrive in that kind of setting.

So one is an officer, like a lieutenant, and another woman is an entrepreneur, and we just meet virtually. But then what we also have done is we've had times where we just went and tried out a vegan restaurant that none of us have tried before in the past. So that was like, to me, it's kind of like, OK, let's try something different. Let's play. Let's set all of the roles aside and just share a meal.

TIM VOGT: I'm interested in how you think this might be important in the work that you all do around connecting people with dis-- well, for connecting people with disabilities, how would this strategically help you?

JILL MAYS: I think that it puts it into a different role. So because it's a shorter term connection and maybe working towards a common goal, there's less at stake, in a way. Someone's abilities and individuality can show through more instead of looking at preconceived notions that someone may have of a person with a disability. It can really present them in a different light. We maybe are drawn to someone's sense of humor or just ability to have fun. And so it lets us view people in a different way.

TIM VOGT: Yeah. Yeah. Totally. Brings us out of those roles, right? I mean, whether we want to talk about it or not, we probably should. There is such thing as a role of a person with a disability and there's a role of a staff support and there's a role of a person without a disability, and the assumptions people make about that stuff, right? So if we can take ourselves out of those traditional inherited roles, roles that have been given to us from our history and from our ancestors, right? So the assumptions we've made.

DANYETTA NAJOLI: But I think doing things with people is a key part, and so I would say, partner. Partner with people that you're with and supporting and go into this space, wherever it is, as a partner, because that gets translated into how someone responds to that. Because again, those roles are so hardwired, in my opinion, into the culture that as soon as people in the community sees a person with a disability and a presumed staff person, they go into some kind of autopilot about what they think should happen next.

So knowing that, it might involve the way I introduce someone, leading with their gifts and sharing what is it about this person that will make others want to know more about. And

there's a fine line because I don't know that I would introduce myself and say, oh, I can do this upon my first introduction, right? So I have to also balance that with, OK, the wisdom of, OK, how do you introduce-- how do you move forward. But I think people need ways that they can experience touches in the community that span over a longer time so people can get to know the person.

TIM VOGT: Yeah. Totally. So I actually was thinking about a story of a project you helped somebody do where they were working at a food pantry, right? So I mean, that right there is helping. Somebody's helping a whole team of people at a food pantry or a soup kitchen -- I don't know which it was called.

But then you also had -- like you all made them aprons, the people that work there. And so the respect of, I know who you are. I've been here with you alongside of you, and I am giving you a gift that is beautiful and useful and expresses our relationship. I just thought that was so cool, right? Tangibly, that's what you helped make happen is a high-quality connection.

DANYETTA NAJOLI: It was great to do that, too, because a lot of the people were wanting aprons from the person. They were like, I want an apron too, you know? It was almost like they were fighting over who gets the apron. It was great. And it's about -- the only way we could have gotten there was to have those, like you mentioned, those quality connections over a period of time to get to know people and get to know maybe what's their favorite color, what would they like, or just something that's a nuance that shows that you value that connection and you respect it.

TIM VOGT: Yeah. So I want to bring up an idea that I had that I think would be a game changer for our work. And it's kind of related to individual service plans or ISPs or person-centered plans, or whatever you want to call it, right? Sometimes I feel like we have this big plan and we're going to plan for the whole year, right? But I think it's interesting that the high-quality connections research would tell us that planning for the whole year, it's OK. It's not bad. We're not doing anything harmful.

But, it might be also really important for us to plan for small chunks of minutes throughout that, right? It's that we're not actually planning for the big goal, but we're planning for about five minutes at a time. And that's the other thing I think is really interesting is one of you brought up time as an element here.

We shouldn't be trying to figure out, necessarily, how to help someone spend the next 50 years. We should be trying to figure out, how do we make five minutes in this local cafe really cool, or how do we bring a gift to these people that are on our team just for maybe a quick 10-minute visit and make that respectful and helpful and playful. Right?

It's that we're looking at really small chunks of time. I think that's really interesting because I think sometimes we get into too big of chunks of time. How do we get somebody out of this day program? Oh, we got to fill up a whole week or we got to fill up a whole day. When really, it's actually about building 5 minutes, 10 minutes.

DANYETTA NAJOLI: I love that. I love that concept.

JILL MAYS: Something that we did here in the past couple of years, just because everything was closed down. There weren't a lot of places that we could go and meet people or hang out. I mean, things changed so drastically that we made gifts for nurses, for the police officers, for the fire departments, and we would stop by just as an appreciation.

We'd go to the local hospital and drop off gifts for the nurses or sometimes we would just go and put things on car windshields, just little notes saying, you're loved, people care about you, that type of thing, because it was such an isolating experience for everyone over the past couple years, and especially during quarantine. So that was a way where we could distance and still show care and just to say, we appreciate you and we appreciate what you're doing.

TIM VOGT: Yeah. So volunteering, donating, giving gifts, these are really powerful. Danyetta's -- I'm going to tell a story, and you can also express it too. But I know for a fact that at some point, we had a budget for our day program, and I feel like it was \$100,000 a year. I'm really -- I'm not kidding. It might have been a little more. It was buying people tickets to go places, buying supplies for art classes.

And at some point we switched it and we said, how does this money actually become a tool to facilitate a connection, a relationship, right? And overnight I saw our staff would do these weird things, like all of a sudden like... Who went to shop at Ten Thousand Villages and spent \$40? And it was like, no, we went there and bought this really cool clay pot that's the perfect color for the neighbor of this person I'm trying to connect with, right? And I was like, oh, that's brilliant, right?

But before that, we were spending 40 bucks on taking five people to Arby's and it was like, well, that didn't go anywhere. Nobody cares about -- nobody at Arby's cares about this group of five people. But then Danyetta has this line, and it's in a video that's, like, 100% one of the best lines in any Starfire video of all time. And Danyetta, you said this so importantly, which is that when we were in our day program, we were taking five people to that same soup kitchen.

But the only person that lived there was the person that you helped connect to. He lived in that same neighborhood, right? And Danyetta's line is when we used to come here, people in here would say, "Hi, Starfire." And instead they started saying -- when we stopped bringing the group of five, they started saying hi to this gentleman. Danyetta, do you remember that line?

DANYETTA NAJOLI: I do remember that line. I remember sharing that when we went to the food pantry and -- it was the soup kitchen, actually. And it was beautiful because he was known. They knew him for who he was and that's so different. And like you said, now that we understand these concepts, I guess from a theory standpoint, we can see how that was so.

How people begin to know him versus lumping everyone into the label that we came under. So that's one of the reasons why sometimes I rarely say what company I'm connected with if I can

help it because people are wanting to understand -- they're trying to figure out, well, how are you all together and what's ... it's just the way the muscle has been built.

Like Jill said earlier on, this is how we've been trained for so long, so we have to know going in that we're unlearning our own selves. We're unlearning things. But then we're also helping citizens to unlearn, and they actually did it automatically with just the small change that we did because they began to refer to the person for who they was once that change happened.

TIM VOGT: If we want to get into this respect for the person we're working with, it might be better to figure out, how do we help them really step forward and show up in a way that doesn't lose their ability to be known at a place, right? And then, how do they be able to give, to contribute, to offer? And that's a strategy that we can learn from. That's awesome. And we're getting yourselves out of these roles just like it's telling you, right?

Now, this last one is related. So all these things are related. This is the shared activities principle. If we do things together, we trust each other and we come to know each other. And this shared activities principle says it helps us build trust. And one thing that I thought was really interesting is one, it's critical that the activity is something that we're passionate about. If you're passionate about something, then you'll make time for it in your busy schedule, so you'll make it a priority.

So that's one critical really interesting thing about it. The second thing is that because it's in this play realm, it creates these things that pop up that we didn't expect. So for example, if we're working on a community project to paint the park bench and it's like -- all of a sudden, we weren't expecting it, but it's a hundred degrees that day. And Jill, you run to go get ice water, and Danyetta, you put the paint in the shade so it doesn't get all dried and ruined.

All of a sudden I'm like, oh my gosh, Danyetta, that was such a big help. We didn't even plan for this and you stepped up and made a difference, right? So the ability to help in the moment for unplanned things, that's why this play element is so important. And it kind of relates a little bit to that high-quality connections thing in that, I mean, we're stuck in our scripted roles, right?

So this is the boss and these are the staff, or this is the person with a disability and this is the person without a disability, and we know how we behave. But when we're playing, when we're working together, when we're doing something outside of those roles, we actually can start to see each other in a new light.

DANYETTA NAJOLI: For me, I've seen it happen where it sort of levels the playing field and people just take off their titles and their labels. I've seen this in my neighborhood on my street where we put together a concert, a street concert, with an artist that could sing for our neighbors during COVID. Because when it was shut -- it was at the peak of the shutdown, too, when no one could really go anywhere.

A lot of the people on this street are very social and they like gatherings and they have families, so we've had so many people come out and just enjoy themselves. And I thought that was just a

great way to endorse what I love doing because I was willing to spend time to organize it and gather the artists and they were on board. And it was great seeing people just play together and enjoy music and there were dogs out and children. It was really good.

TIM VOGT: Jill, are you like listening to that story and you're like, I want to go live on Danyetta's block.

JILL MAYS: Yeah, I do.

TIM VOGT: I know. I think that's what's interesting about it is if we build these things together, it's kind of really attractive. And why can't our work be about building a street singalong party? I mean, it could be, right? Jill, what about you? Where have you seen some of these things in your life or in your work?

JILL MAYS: I can think of a couple examples. At work we founded and chartered a little free library, which actually you gave a little help with there. But we encountered a number of hiccups, but it really was a project embraced by the whole community. We partnered with another agency, another company that actually built it. We've made connections with people from the city now through this with the library.

We did a scavenger hunt last summer, which involved that and some of the businesses. In fact, a few weeks ago in a storm, the door was damaged. So it's closed right now and we had taken all the books out and people keep putting books in. We have to keep removing them because it's become such a community and popular thing. It brought a lot of people together.

TIM VOGT: I keep coming back to, this could be our work. A lot of our work in connecting could be, well, what if it wasn't about trying to figure out how you build a connected life, but what if the way to build a connected life was these small, high-quality experiences that people got to see each other over and over and over and they were respecting each other and they were helping each other and they were playing around to invent really cool experiences for each other? It just feels like we've got a huge opportunity in front of us, you know?

DANYETTA NAJOLI: That sounds like a game changer to me as well because that is not how it's done right now. But to think that you can string along those interactions and then make an enriching life when you step back and look at it, because that's really what we have when I think about it, too, is we have moments. But not to get so existential or anything, but I mean, that's really what we have. So to be able to be intentional about it is a good thing.

TIM VOGT: Thanks, Danyetta. I mean, by the way, it's cool to get existential about it, you know? Yeah, you're right. We do have moments, and I think that that's really bringing us to a good place to start to wrap this up, which is it matters how we spend the moments. And in particular, it matters how we spend our work moments to help someone else maybe experience their life moments, right? It's almost like sacred work to take it super seriously.

And I just thought that when I came across these pieces of research, I thought, wow, that might really help somebody who's wondering, well, what is step one? Well, step one might just be get familiar yourself with community. Like go sing with your neighbors, or find out what it feels like for you, right? And then step two might be to help someone else do that and see how they might get familiar.

And then start to think about how to show respect and how to help other people and how to play around and create projects with other people, right? So there's these small, tiny steps that really matter and these moments that build up to these bigger stories. And we sometimes get enamored with or frustrated by -- be enamored with the idea, oh, there's going to be a bigger story.

Or frustrated that a huge story isn't here yet and we haven't done the work of necessarily building those moments, like you said, Danyetta. So ... I think you brought it up and summarized that really well. We do just have moments. Thank you. OK, so last word. I mean, what do you all think, tying this stuff together? Familiarity and high-quality connections and shared activities.

JILL MAYES: I mean, even in the beginning, I just felt like all three of these, there was so much overlap. And so I think that we can look at that with the more shared activities and high-quality connections that we have, the more exposure and familiarity the communities are going to have -- we'll have with the community and the community will have with us. So it's all interrelated. You can't just take one out and not have them all together.

DANYETTA NAJOLI: I agree that they're interconnected. I just also think that people may already be doing a lot of this, but might not be calling it this. And that's important to note, I feel, because that makes it a little easier. It could make it a little easier for people to approach it if they say, OK, where else am I doing this? Wait, I'm already doing this with my family reunion when I plan the events, or I'm already doing this when I whatever the thing is.

So that's a low-hanging fruit to me. And then I think -- and it makes it approachable. I'm just looking at someone that's thinking, oh my goodness, where do I start? Like you said, it's the small steps. And then the last thing I was thinking of is that collective societies are doing this already as well. A lot of this is happening maybe through popular education or just what people have learned to do to build community naturally.

So I think there's a lot. And we even study these societies or groups that lean into each other, whether it's a small, close-knit community in Lower Price Hill or whether it's a place in Kenya. There are places that there are people that do this naturally, and I think that's something to note and to honor. They may already be doing it somewhere else, and how can that be translated?

TIM VOGT: I love it when we can synthesize. But I mean, first of all, just thank you both for your work in the world as people. And I really appreciate that because I think sometimes I've noticed that we tend to turn ourselves off when we come home from work, you know? It's like, oh,

that's what I do at work. But y'all are walking the talk on your weekends and evenings, and I think that that really informs your work in a way that you can't really train. You know?

You just learn lessons that way. That's really admirable, and I appreciate the world you're building for all of us. I also appreciate your work and how you have brought such a learning, mindful, and informed approach through all of the ways that you've stepped outside of your own comfort zones, and that that work is helping other people participate in building a better world. You know?

Like ... I don't know. I've learned a lot in this conversation and one of the things I learned is it's not really about a good life in the way that we think. It's not about, how do you get a house and a car and a whatever it is. It's really about living your moments well with other people. And we actually -- that's infinitely doable. We can do it in an hour. We can do it tomorrow. We can do it any time we want.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SIMON BUEHRER: That was Tim Vogt. He focuses on organizational change and family-directed community engagement at Starfire in Cincinnati. We also heard from Tim's colleague Danyetta Najoli. She's the lead community builder at Starfire. You can learn more about their programs and services at starfirecincy.org.

We also heard from Jill Mays, a development and community relations coordinator for PSU in Lebanon, Ohio. You can learn more about PSU at psuinc.org. This conversation was originally recorded as part of the Innovation Series, co-developed by the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities and OCALI. You can watch the unedited full-length video on the Employment First website. That's at ohioemploymentfirst.org.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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[MUSIC PLAYING]