

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

I'm Simon Buehrer. In episode 2 we spent the day at the Ohio State Fair, where we met up with some of the people attending the first ever sensory-friendly morning at the fair. We were lucky to speak with lots of different people on that beautiful day in July including Kevin Miller, the director of Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities.

Director Miller and I had a great conversation. We talked about the new changes to the state fair this year, designed to make it more accessible and inclusive. In addition to the sensory-friendly morning, we also discussed the new permanent wheelchair charging stations at the fairgrounds and the Aira technology, which helps people who are blind or visually impaired navigate a large and unfamiliar space on their own. It's pretty cool.

We simply weren't able to include all of our conversation in episode 2, so here's our full 10 minute interview. Oh, and one more thing. We were standing inside the Ohio Department of Natural Resources park at the fairgrounds.

If you've never been there, you should really go. Anyway, that's why you'll occasionally hear the ebb and flow of cicadas in the background. OK, so here's my conversation with director Kevin Miller from Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Are we doing this together or no?

**SIMON BUEHRER:** He doesn't want to do it.

**SHAWN HENRY:** He said he'd do it earlier. He blends it.

**KEVIN MILLER:** OK, cool.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** We'll just mix it all in together. So tell me a little bit. Let's just start from the beginning. What's going on today here at the fair?

**KEVIN MILLER:** Well, it's a great day. You know, White Castle is sponsoring an event with OCALI and in partnership with the Department of Developmental Disabilities and our agency, Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, to make sure that those individuals who have sensory sensitivities with their diagnosis-- especially maybe on the autism spectrum-- can really come out and enjoy the fair. And that's something that's near and dear to my heart because my son who is

on the spectrum-- when he was diagnosed-- he's now a 20-year-old man. But the fair would not be a place we could have taken him when he was a toddler.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Really.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Yeah, and so I spoke earlier to somebody, and I said, parents have to think ahead on things like this. And you would be amazed when you have a child with a diagnosis such as this-- especially that involves sensory integration issues-- that just going to a restaurant-- the type of restaurant you go to-- you have to understand. If you go to a buffet, it's going to be loud, and bustling, and too many people. My son would not have done well there. So as parents you are always thinking ahead of-- preplanning. And so having something like this where-- let's think about it though. Someone who doesn't have sensory integration issues-- what's the one thing that's cool about coming to the fair? You hear the music, and the lights, and people, and it's all that stuff. Well, someone who is on the spectrum-- that's a recipe for disaster. You're putting all three things-- four things in there, where usually one would really cause some issues.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Exactly.

**KEVIN MILLER:** And so I just think it's a great idea that director Henry came up with in working with White Castle. And we've had tremendous outreach. I think CNN--

**SIMON BUEHRER:** There's a lot of interest.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Yeah, CNN put it out there. We've been retweeting it. And we're also involved in putting wheelchair charging stations throughout the fairgrounds. And that's a permanent investment.

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

**KEVIN MILLER:** First time-- that's right.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** So if I'm in a wheelchair and I need to charge up, there are stations throughout the fair where I can go and charge up.

**KEVIN MILLER:** And they've put them on the map, so you can see those. And I think what's-- it's great that we're here at the fair, and it's kind of a time event like this. But people forget there's 200 plus events year round that are here for the general public.

So that means-- we had a gentleman who said, I've wanted to come to a couple of concerts, but I was afraid my wheelchair was going to run out of battery juice. And so he said, now I can

think ahead, and go, you know what? I can go and do that.

So just the idea of access and integration-- a lot of people say that, but when you can see something like this, and then you actually talk to someone who actually tells you this is going to make a difference-- it really does. So we've got that going on. And we've got the Aira technology.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Tell me about the Aira technology because I saw someone using it last Thursday.

**KEVIN MILLER:** It's phenomenal.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** It was pretty cool.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Yeah, what did you think?

**SIMON BUEHRER:** I thought it was amazing. We were on the midway, and he was clearly visually impaired. But he was also clearly navigating on his own straight down the midway, which is full of other people and obstacles in the way. And he's moving through it clearly with a destination in mind.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Right, and individuals who are blind or have low vision-- they're always usually relying on somebody else. And so yesterday I spoke--

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Especially in a place like the fair.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Absolutely. And so the decisions aren't really theirs all the time. They're having to rely on a friend or a family member so--

**SIMON BUEHRER:** A dog.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Yeah, exactly. And so this technology allows you-- there's glasses that you can purchase, or you can use your smartphone's--

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Camera.

**KEVIN MILLER:** --camera. And so you download this for free. We're providing this free at the state fair. So you don't have to worry about purchasing the minutes, which is how this technology works. It's like a cell phone plan.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Right, as long as you have the app or the glasses when you come to the fair, you can use this service at no cost.

**KEVIN MILLER:** That's correct-- no cost. And what that does is-- it's basically like a personal concierge that the individual who's blind can utilize. And they see what the glasses see. So when you have these glasses on-- it was amazing. I saw the gentleman-- he said, I'd like to go get a corn dog.

And so the person is able to see this, and

**Simon Buehrer:** There's somebody on the other end.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Right.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Who's like video conferencing--

**KEVIN MILLER:** That's right.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Through your, either your glasses or your smartphone. And they're seeing what you're seeing, through the lens of your camera or the glasses.

**KEVIN MILLER:** So for your listeners, if they've ever Skyped or done something like that, it's very similar to that. They're sitting at a laptop, and they could be in Louisiana-- these operators are all over the country-- and they're able to see--

**SIMON BUEHRER:** They're remote.

**KEVIN MILLER:** That's correct, they're remote. And so they are able to navigate, and talk them, and walk them through where they need to go. And so he was walking and he said, yeah, I'm looking for a corn dog. And so he said, oh, here's one. Turn to 3 o'clock, because they kind of use a 12 o'clock navigation.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** OK, to help orient people.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Correct. Yeah, and you're about 50 yards away.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** OK.

**KEVIN MILLER:** And they got up there. They're like oh, the corn dogs are \$5. And so when he pulled out his wallet--

**SIMON BUEHRER:** It's cash only.

**KEVIN MILLER:** And so, it's cash, and so now they're able to help them with the denomination of the bills and

to make sure they got their correct change. And then when he got done-- this is another thing that I thought was amazing-- he said, can you order me an Uber, because I need to get to work.

And so the operator pulled up. Because they're utilizing Google Maps and everything. And they said, yeah, we see your closest to this gate, which is at the corner of such and such, and such and such. And come over this way, turn left, to 9:00, and let's start walking this way.

And they'll talk with them to get them to the actual pickup spot. And as an added bonus, where you don't think about this from a safety component with Uber or Lyft, is they'll tell you this is what the driver's name is, this is what the license plate and type of car is. So when they pull up, I'll make sure that I verify that it's the right color car, the right make. So it was just amazing to think about that. And with that all boils down to is it allows the individual who's blind to make the decision and not rely on somebody else.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Yeah, because really, that person is kind of just providing them with information that the rest of us, who are sighted, automatically are taking in, and which allow us to do things independently, that we do without thinking about it.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Exactly.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** And so really, this is about giving others access to participate on their own, individually, and to do what the rest of us take for granted.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Well, you talk about independence.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Yeah.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Our agency, one of our main guiding principles is how do we help individuals with disabilities be independent. The overwhelming majority of individuals we work with will tell you, we're not asking for a leg up. We're just asking to have a level playing field, and base us on our merits, and our work ethic, and what we can do. So when you are able to start shrinking that gap even more with the IRA technology, or someone who is in an electric wheelchair, having a sensory friendly day, you're making the fair more accessible. And that was a huge, huge part of Governor Devine's conversation with us, when we said-- he challenged every cabinet director to say, all of you have something to do with the fair, so what can you do to make a difference for people who are coming to the fair?

**SIMON BUEHER:** So is that how this started?

**Kevin Miller:** Absolutely. We started to look at what are some things that we could do as part of our mission when it comes to the fair. And obviously, that's a lot to do with access, and independence, and making things more enjoyable and educational for people to understand also who we are, and maybe we could help them if they're not aware that they need that type of help.

And so we've been at a fair almost every day. I'm nice and tanned. Your listeners don't know this. I've had people go, oh, have you been on vacation? No, I've been at the fair every day. So it's been great. You know, it's a great time to get out to the fair. And who doesn't like to have some of that great food that you can't find anywhere else.

And so you see the things that we've talked about on an everyday basis. And like this morning, with the sensory friendly day, I think about how that wouldn't have been something my son could have went to. And so it's great to see other young kids who are with their parents be able to think, well, maybe we couldn't have went to the fair before, we can go to the fair now.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Right, and knowing that there's a place, if I need to go take a break from everything that's happening, there's a place that I can go and do that.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Right.

With the quiet room that OCALI has provided.

People who don't have something like this in their family, maybe don't understand. But if it's in your family, or you have a close friend who has a child, they know all about it. And they understand how important it is that kids have a break. Adults too, who are on the spectrum. And my son, who's 20 now, he's a lot better than he was, obviously, when he was a kid. But he'll tell you--

**SIMON BUEHRER:** He's got life experience.

**KEVIN MILLER:** He'll tell us, he'll go look, I need some time.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** And he can advocate for himself.

**KEVIN MILLER:** That's right, he can advocate for himself. When you're a kid you, sometimes can't do that, especially if you're not verbal, or you have limited verbal skills. And so it's just a great way to make sure it's enjoyable for everybody who comes out to the fair.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That's really great. Thank you so much for your time.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Thank for the time.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** I really appreciate it.

**KEVIN MILLER:** Appreciate it.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** We'll see you soon.

**KEVIN MILLER:** All right, take care.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Thanks for listening to inspiring conversations. Bonus content from OCALI's Inspiring Change podcast. Be sure to subscribe to Inspiring Change, wherever you get your podcasts. And if you or someone needs an accessible version of this podcast, visit [OCALI.org/Podcast](https://ocali.org/Podcast) and click on the link to Inspiring Change. I'm Simon Buehrer. See you soon.