

ARISE Podcast #089

Working Title: NYS Fair Sensory Room

Host: Tania Anderson, CEO, ARISE

Guest: Piper Cooper - Excelsior Service Fellow, NYS Fair

Transcription:

Tania Anderson 0:24

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tania Anderson CEO at ARISE and with us today is Piper Cooper, who is an Excelsior Service Fellow for the New York State Fair. Welcome Piper.

Piper Cooper 0:36

Hi. Thank you for having me.

Tania Anderson 0:37

So, tell me what an Excelsior Service Fellow at the New York State Fair does or is,

Piper Cooper 0:44

yeah, it's kind of not a position title you'll always hear. So, I'm a part of a fellowship program in New York State so they will take new graduates from professional programs. So, everything from law degrees to PhDs to I have my master's that I recently just got, and they'll place you with different agencies or departments across New York state. So, I ended up getting placed in finding a good role with the New York State Fair which is a part of the Department of Ag and Markets with New York State and I work on policy and procedure there. A lot of operational stuff with our director, Julie LaFave and just working on a lot of special projects and anything to kind of help the fairgoers experience so it's a lot of behind the scenes work in a lot of writing, a lot of reading and a lot of research but a lot of cool stuff to kind of see how it all plays out when it comes to the fair.

Tania Anderson 1:37

Wow. So, I think you were very lucky to get the fair as your match, because I love the fair. I'm sure you love the fair now and we think about the fair it's just this festival at the end of the summer, but it really is a business operation that's year-round with planning. So, it makes sense to me that you're doing this kind of work.

Piper Cooper 1:58

Oh, yeah, there's, it's amazing. I've gone to the fair a couple of times before joining the team but it's incredible to see how much work there's planning. As soon as the fair ends for the next one, you know, you're counting down the days but you're also working on you know, what can we work on for next year and you're planning ahead, so it's a full year-round planning. And there's a huge team there's a lot more into it than I ever thought you know, you kind of see the behind the scenes, so it's a really cool experience. To kind of be a part of this team and just see how everything is working from the inside.

Tania Anderson 2:28

So that is so interesting and at ARISE. We have worked closely with fare staff for many years about accessibility issues. Things like go charging stations for people who use power wheelchairs, just curb cuts, cooling stations, all sorts of things. And the Fair has always been so receptive to our feedback about increasing accessibility and inclusion and making that that sites just more welcoming to the whole community. And I'm just really excited about the project that is most recently that is going to be introduced at the fair that you got/ to work on and that is a sensory room. So, can you tell us what is a sensory room.

Piper Cooper 3:14

So, a sensory room in a very, kind of plain Reader's Digest version, description is anybody from experiencing PTSD, dementia, Alzheimer's, or autism spectrum disorder or even just you know, kind of feeling overstimulated overwhelmed, is a room that's available, just to kind of be able to bring yourself back down and calm down. Most of the time, you know, placing items to kind of help with the overstimulation or the under stimulation, and just kind of a quiet place to relax and just kind of process everything the fear is definitely a busy and very overwhelming experience, typically is very hot. So, our sensory room is just going to kind of escape an opportunity to go to catch that rat, but also just to be able to process everything and kind of be able to calm down and relax and kind of take it all in so that they can get the full experience and not feel too overwhelmed by everything.

Tania Anderson 4:18

It sounds like it's a great idea. Where is the sensory room at the fairgrounds,

Piper Cooper 4:22

so the sensory room is going to be located in the Wegman's Art & Home building. So I'll be closest to kind of closest to where Daniella's is and the Horticulture building so we will have some signage directing people folks but it will be in a smaller room towards the corner towards

the Art & where it is in the morning. In a smaller room towards the corner of the Art and Home building there.

Tania Anderson 4:36

One of my favorite buildings, by the way. So, I you mentioned this, but the fair is it's huge. It's busy, it's hot. There's a lot of there's a lot of stimulation, like to see a lot of noise, a lot of smells, there's animals, there's people, there's everything. It's hard for me to think of someone who wouldn't want to go to a quiet space and just sort of reset.

Piper Cooper 5:03

No. Absolutely. I think we had a lot of great advice and recommendations, you know, from community partners from other county fairs, who are also doing sensory rooms in New York State and also reaching out to our other partners. Other state fairs like Iowa State Fair, you know, Minnesota State Fair at some other examples too, who are already working on sensory inclusion and working on more accessibility for their fairgoer. So, it's something that's available to everyone, regardless of your ability, regardless of what you identify with, regardless of age, you know, just an opportunity for you to enjoy your fairgoer or experience and especially you know, even to go inside a cool room and cool down for a few minutes. I'll be in an air-conditioned room. Just have some nice quiet room seating. It's our first year doing it. So, we're definitely kind of trying things out and seeing how fairgoers will enjoy it but we have a few different seating options kind of soft, like beanbag chairs just to kind of be able to sink in, relax, sit down. We'll have lights off but we'll also have a projector, kind of a star light projector, so we can have some kind of soft ambient lighting and also soft, gentle music in the background. There won't be any loud P.A. announcements in there. It'll be air conditioned and then we'll have some other sensory items. Some weighted lap pads and some weighted stuffed animals that'll be kind of fun for the kids if they ever go in there. And some other kind of sensory fidget toys for folks just to kind of help bring themselves down if they're feeling overstimulated or overwhelmed and just be able to have that nice quiet dark room that is to relax in for a little bit.

Tania Anderson 6:48

Sounds great actually. And folks, when they find the room and they enter the room, is there any sort of protocol in terms of how long they can be there or do they have to sign in that sort of thing?

Piper Cooper 7:00

We recommend, you know, about 10 people in the room at a time. You know, it's a fairly large room, I'd say, you know, probably a little bit bigger than the room we're in but just to kind of keep it spaced out. You know, we asked people to you know, always check their personal

space, you know, take anything that you bring in there with you know, food or drink and just be respectful of the space the items in there and respect for each other. You know, we all want to be able to utilize this room and enjoy the opportunities that we have there. So just kind of respecting the space and the respecting each other and then you know if any children are in there having a parent or a guardian with them at the time, and we recommend you know, if you want to stay there for five minutes just to catch your breath or you need to stay there for 20 minutes, you know, totally okay, so we're thinking right around that kind of sweet spot. Just have people in there. So just about 10 about you know, 10 to 20 minutes, hang out, catch your breath and then see if you're ready to go tackle the rest of the fairgrounds,

Tania Anderson 8:04

Right. Yeah. And you had mentioned that you got this idea from other fairs that have a similar sort of sensory room and other venues. What is some of the advice that you got from these other locations?

Piper Cooper 8:20

Yeah, I think Julie and I had talked a lot about you know, what can we pull from other fair great ideas because a lot of it's about idea sharing and resource sharing, you know, we're all in competition with each other but at the end of the day, you know, we all want to see each other's fares thrive. So what we got our best advices you know, listen to the communities and listen to what people want out of a room, because I think, often times, you know, you can look at something in a room or you can look at an experience and think, oh, my gosh, you know, I'm not going to have a problem with that or that's totally fine. Whereas, if you kind of put yourself in the shoes of somebody who might have a sensory issue or someone who might be experiencing, you know, dementia or PTSD, some of these things might be triggering. So kind of putting yourself in their shoes and thinking what would their experience be like and what might be helpful or what might be hurtful in those situations. So that kind of was a lot of our intention with the room was making sure that we were very purposeful in how we set things up, what kind of items and making sure you know, is it the best option for each Farrago, or, you know, there's going to be different needs for everybody. So that was the biggest advice that we had. It's just trying to think of what each experience is like and how can we best accommodate that?

Tania Anderson 9:34

Right that's great. And I know you reached out to ARISE and we were able to send an expert over to give our advice in terms of what we would suggest in the room. What are some of the other partners that you reached out to?

Piper Cooper 9:48

We reached out to Elmcrest Behavioral Center and also some other community partners, just other contacts within New York State, who are experts you know, in occupational therapy, Disability Resources, just kind of getting whatever advice and recommendations from those experts on what they feel might be a good approach to our sensory room. It is our first year doing it. So, we know. It's gonna be a different experience for a lot of fairgoers, and I'm sure you know, there'll be things that we always want to improve on. But we're really excited for this first step to have this sensory room available. So, we got a lot of recommendations from our different state agency partners that were really helpful to see how we can start this off on a good foot.

Tania Anderson 10:31

That's great. That's really great. And, and you mentioned this, but I think we can really just reinforce that this room was really available to anyone so we you know, we talked about sensory issues with air quotes, but really, all of us have some sort of sensory issue whether it's, I mean, the heat is too much and the humidity bothers us or someone gets cold or loud noises that upset us or startle us or sometimes you have a particular item of clothing that's just scratchy and itchy. So, it's Can you talk a little bit more about just the range of people that would benefit from this experience?

Piper Cooper 11:08

Yeah, I mean, I would say it's honestly anybody who wants to utilize it, you know, regardless of whether it's a staff member, it's a young child or an older senior individual, you know, regardless of your age or your ability This is available to anyone and everyone. So, I know for me even you know, I will probably use it just to cool down and sit in a quiet room and just be able to relax and kind of get away for a few minutes and catch my breath and not, you know, be a part of the whole buzz and everything else. You know, I know it can get really busy. There's a lot of different smells. There's a lot of different sites to see. I know I'm in as a fairgoer or get really excited to go and try to see everything as much as I can in one day and that can be tiring. So, it's just a place where you know, regardless of how you're feeling or what you need, you know go checkout, even if you don't necessarily need to utilize it. It's a cool space to see another aspect of the fair that we would really love to promote and show to everyone and it's available to anyone who needs it. So, I think we're just excited to have that. Regardless if you just need a place to sit or you do need a place to calm down and kind of use the sensory fidget toys and just exciting to see what it will come out of but anybody can use it and that's the best part about it. I think

Tania Anderson 12:26

That is the best part about it. I totally agree. And I'm thinking about the fair because I do love the fair and there are lots of spaces built into the fair, I think already that can help people sort of check themselves just rejuvenate themselves. I'm thinking about the fountain around the

state park, the mini State Park. I always like the room with a player piano is going where people can just sit and listen. Lots of more green space in there ever used to be what are some of your favorite spots to sort of just take soak it all in at the fairgrounds.

Unknown 13:05

I think the State Park is definitely a really exciting one and really one that I enjoy. I personally love to go in the horticulture building. I think that's one of my favorite buildings architecturally. And just seeing a lot of the vendors in there which is really cool. And we've been doing a lot of work in there this year to kind of make things new and exciting. And another place for me that I really enjoy. I like going over to the youth building I wasn't for each as a kid, too. So I really enjoy going over there, checking things out and seeing what the kids are doing. Kind of can be another quiet dark area to go into. So those are a couple of my favorite spots to go kind of hang out and see everything because you can kind of catch the waves of people going in. So right it's nice to go check those things out and kind of see what's going on tends to be a little bit smaller crowds at times depending on the day.

Tania Anderson 13:56

Right, right. Yeah, you're the horticultural building is great. And they've got those interior gardens there, which I'm very refreshing. I also have literally like the art in the women's building. It's not called the Women's building anymore, is it?

Piper Cooper 14:11

No, it used to be the women's building.

Tania Anderson 14:13

I'm showing my age as a Syracusan.

Piper Cooper 14:16

yeah, I think now it's a Wegmans art home we still have a lot of the aspects of the women's building in there but that's also a really cool to see a lot of the artwork that's prepared ahead of time. The quilts in there are really great to see love going to see the quilts. That's another great places to go into art and home. There's a lot of hidden gems. So I definitely recommend exploring and you can kind of find those little hidden pockets that aren't always the big events but definitely still really integral to the whole entire affair experience

Tania Anderson 14:49

Absolutely. And wandering through the animal barns and it's a different sensory experience. But it's there really is something for everyone. And so, I don't think we can talk about the fare without me asking you your favorite fair food.

Unknown 15:03

Okay, so this is this is hard. It always kind of changes but I think for me, it's always given like a classic corndog at the fair. Like, I will I will try to find I know there's a couple of vendors who will have some like unique twist on some corndogs and I know we have some new vendors this year that will kind of bring different flavor different kinds of spice to things with their version take on you know the classic fair food but for me, you know when I'm going to the fair I'm looking for like a nice ice cold slushy and a corndog and just kind of exploring you know, it's kind of the stuff that I wouldn't have at home. So just trying to go for that kind of classic fair food experience. That's probably my favorite.

Tania Anderson 15:47

Okay, well, I corndog was not top of mind. That's why the fair is great because everyone has to get what they want.

Unknown 15:55

Piper Cooper

I know we ask the question with our staff and with everyone all the time and it's always a different answer and a different reason and it's always funny to hear you know, why is that your favorite or oh my gosh, this is my favorite. Why would you pick that you know, the fun little kind of banter and experience of what your favorite is everyone's got their own kind of different memory and experience with it which is really cool.

Tania Anderson 16:18

Thank you, Piper, so much for what you're doing to make our fair even better than it already is. And I'm really excited about the sensory room and really glad ARISE was able to help and just really applaud you for just thinking outside the box and making sure that everyone has a great experience and is completely included in this wonderful event. So, thank you, Piper

Piper Cooper 16:38

No, thank you. I definitely you know, I've been a strong part of it and really proud that I'm able to work on this and kind of see how it turns out for our first year with it but definitely couldn't have done it without all the help with the State Fair staff and a lot of the community partners you know, it wouldn't have gotten off the ground and I think been as successful as we've been so far trying to get everything together without all the help from everyone else. So glad to be a part of the team and really excited to see how I can help fairgoers for years to come.

Tania Anderson

Yeah me too. Great. Thank you.

Piper Cooper

Thank you

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