

REMEMBER THE 'A'

By Beth Ann Balalaos

The Long Island Children's Museum has focused on accessible programming for people with disabilities—and grown its audience along the way.

Students from Long Island Children's Museum's Westbury STEM4all Program enjoying the *Bubbles* exhibit.



In recent years, many in the museum field have sought to shed light on the barriers facing visitors and staff who are marginalized. I, too, have focused on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) at my museum—and specifically on the A, accessibility.

Accessibility focuses on those with disabilities, which is a substantial segment of the US population. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 1 in 4 adults (28.7 percent) has a disability—73.4 million people. Including children (those under 18) with this population adds another 3 million people with disabilities, according to US Census data. Despite representing a significant portion of the population, people with disabilities are sometimes an afterthought in DEAI conversations, or are excluded altogether. For museums to be inclusive environments for all, the disability community must be included in our DEAI work.

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Long Island Children's Museum's east entrance and a view into the *Our Backyard* exhibit.

In 2015, I helped the Long Island Children's Museum (LICM) launch a museum-wide access initiative called LICM4all. LICM's mission is to connect all of our community's children, and those who care for them, to one another and a life of wonder, imagination, and exploration. LICM4all was a natural next

step to expand our audience. I have been involved in this program as not only a museum educator but also a person with disabilities. That said, when you've met one person with a disability, you've met one person with a disability. Although I have spent the majority of my career as an accessibility specialist, this field is growing, and my experiences and solutions will not always match what others with disabilities need. Listening to the needs of people with disabilities in your own community is crucial when developing programs for them.

The main goal of the LICM4all program is to create a more inclusive and accessible museum by not only making physical changes to the museum that exceed compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) but also by considering access in every aspect of LICM, every day. We have revamped staff training, created a designated access page on the museum website, established programs

specifically for visitors with disabilities, and offer tools for families to make their experience at LICM more enjoyable. Although I am the point person for LICM4all, each department has a role in our access program so that it is maximally impactful and consistent across the museum.

Starting Our Accessibility Program

The LICM4all program began after conversations with floor staff following participation in the Cultural Competence Learning Institute (CCLI), which guides museum staff as

they catalyze diversity and inclusion efforts in their organizations. LICM was one of the first cohorts to participate in this program and helped pilot it with 10 staff members. Teachings from the CCLI multi-year experience were then brought to all LICM staff, and through conversations about cultivating DEAI,

LICM4all was born. LICM4all, an IMLS-funded initiative, seeks to create more accessible and inclusive museum environments for visitors with disabilities.

The first step in creating a successful access program is to take a deep dive into best practices in the field. We researched other museums that had access programs and set up informational phone calls to gain insight. New York's Museum, Arts and Culture Access Consortium and museum associations, such as the Association of Children's Museums, the Museum Association of New York, and, of course, AAM, also had helpful tips and ways to find other organizations for collaborations. By far, one of the most impactful resources is the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability conference organized by the Kennedy Center. The final stage of this process must be outreach to the disability community in your area; the best way to understand what your community needs is to ask them.

When we first expanded LICM4all, I assumed families would eagerly embrace the new access programming. But this was not the case, largely because they did not yet see us as advocates for their families. It took time and many community meetings to gain their respect and trust, which we did by having open and honest conversations about their families' needs. When they could see that these conversations led to changes at LICM, they started to see us as advocates. Today, 9 percent of our visitors identify someone in their family as having a disability.

As we started to expand LICM4all, we uncovered another big challenge: staff often felt uncomfortable engaging with visitors with disabilities. They were nervous that they might offend someone with a disability, so they often would not engage with them at all. This changed through vigorous staff training on the basics of disabilities, accommodations, and language sensitivity. Staff also met with parents of children with disabilities and people with disabilities to hear firsthand experiences.

Our Access Programming

In our conversations with our disability community and their families, we learned they were looking for a safe space where they would not feel judged by others. As a result, we created one of the most popular

TIPS FOR BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL ACCESS PROGRAM

- Read the ADA Guidelines front to back—these are the bare minimum requirements. Familiarize yourself with all the requirements for web accessibility.
- Meet with members of the disability community in your area to gather their input on how to meet their needs. Compensate them for their time.
- Create an advisory committee of people with disabilities and the experts who serve them to ensure you are using best practices.
- Add an access tab or web page to your website that includes information about service animals, accessible parking spots, assistive listening devices, and any other accessibility tools your museum offers.
- Add more seating areas to your exhibit spaces.
- If your space can feel overwhelming or noisy for some, offer noise-reducing headphones that visitors can check out when needed.
- Conduct staff training on best practices for serving people with disabilities—preferably by an accessibility consultant and/or person with a disability.
- Consider attending the Kennedy Center's Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability conference, which covers all aspects of access for cultural organizations.

All photos courtesy of the Long Island Children's Museum



Long Island Children's Museum's new *Inside-A-Bubble* is designed to be fully accessible for all visitors.

elements of our access program, Friendly Hours, a free monthly evening at the museum when children and adults with disabilities, along with their families, can play in LICM's 14 interactive exhibits in a more comfortable setting. Other organizations have similar events that have the word "sensory" in the name. We felt that Friendly Hours was a less limiting name since we are seeking to accommodate people with a multitude of disabilities.

With Friendly Hours, we have smaller and calmer versions of some of our large special events

like our Countdown to 12! New Years Eve Party and Ghostly Gala Halloween event. And through the LICM4all program, we have been able to adapt each run of our live children's theater performances into Sensory Friendly Theater Performances, where visitors can attend without fear of being judged or scrutinized.

The goal is for everyone to feel comfortable coming to LICM at any time, but many children and adults with disabilities have found a stronger sense of belonging and community when surrounded

by those who understand their daily experiences. This feeling is called access intimacy—when those around you understand what you need because of your disability.

Once the disability community saw LICM's commitment to serving their families through consistent programming, along with changes in staff engagement and exhibits, members began to share our programming within their own communities. Now, information about our accessible programs spreads organically through word-of-mouth in an incredibly powerful way. Families will often share our dedicated web page about accessibility on their own social media.

Friendly Hours and Sensory Friendly Theater Performances often sell out within a few days, if not hours. We are also engaging new people: generally, at least 25 percent of visitors at each event have never been to LICM before. In the first few years of LICM4all, visitors told us that they wanted more access programs. In response, we increased attendance limits while maintaining a comfortable level of interaction.

Offering Assistive Tools

A successful access program ensures that every visitor encounters minimal barriers and enjoys a positive and inclusive experience. Some of the ways LICM achieves this is by ensuring our space exceeds ADA compliance, which we accomplish through wayfinding signage, accessible bathroom stalls and routes, video captioning, reach range (used to determine the height of components), and more.

Another key component is assistive tools. For example, we have a sensory backpack that includes noise-reducing headphones, weighted lap pads, fidget items, a sensory map that notes places for those who are sensory sensitive or a sensory seeker, and more. Additionally, LICM provides social guides to help visitors prepare for a visit or theater performance, explaining, for example, how visitors will first walk through big yellow doors and go to the Box Office to get tickets, where they might have to wait their turn. Such advance detail can ease some of the anxiety or hesitation that may come with entering a new space.

RESOURCES

Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability
kennedy-center.org/education

Web Accessibility Initiative, "Introduction to Web Accessibility"

w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/accessibility-intro

Museum, Arts and Culture Access Consortium
macaccess.org

Emily Ladau, *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally*, 2021

We also offer a sensory room, which provides respite for visitors who are feeling anxious or overwhelmed and sensory input for those who are sensory seekers. Offering these spaces and tools goes beyond ADA compliance and reduces barriers for visitors with disabilities. We want to create a space that embraces and includes those with disabilities instead of just tolerating them, as often happens to those with disabilities.

Having a disability is a part of being human, and it gives those with disabilities a unique experience of and perspective on the world. By considering these perspectives assets, our museums can bring in new audiences, which ultimately increases revenue. In other words, being an accessible space that welcomes all literally pays.

It is our job as a society, and on a smaller level as members of the museum field, to try to remove the barriers that marginalized populations face. That is one of the most beautiful aspects of cultural organizations: we can bring together communities in an environment that can reduce their sense of "otherness." As a part of the disability and LGBTQIA+ communities, I have felt a sense of "otherness" many times in my life. Being in a space that lessens this feeling is truly magical. By making our museums as inclusive and accessible as possible, we help our visitors be their most authentic selves.

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