

**Application for
Diversity, Equity, and
Inclusion Initiative**

**ChristmasVille's
Sensory Sensitive
Santa Event**

Judges' score - 9.3

Detailed description of the event

New to the 2022 ChristmasVille landscape was the Sensory Sensitive Santa Event on Sunday, December 4th from 9am - noon (prior to the start of the final day of the Festival). Though not a new concept within the event industry, this was the first intentional effort to have a standalone event for this particular underserved community of individuals with sensory sensitivities and their families - families who don't typically have the luxury to attend festivals such as ChristmasVille. We all know that the sights, sounds, and aromas of a festival make it a magical, memorable experience for most, but that's just not the case for everyone. Due to a personal relationship with someone who falls on the extreme end of the Autism spectrum, the Festival chair wanted to find a way to not only include this community, but also modify various elements of the Festival so that they not only felt included, but celebrated and supported! In partnering with a local coffee shop (prior to their opening to the public for the day), festival organizers were able to create the perfect environment for our friends who get a bit anxious and overwhelmed when overstimulated so that they could visit Santa prior to the festival's final day getting underway. Sensory stations were also positioned throughout the space for some hands-on activities so that these children had their own version of Santa's Workshop (one of the festival's most popular events) where they could interact and play to their comfort level. The bins at each station included items they could touch, taste, smell, see, and hear, and activities that helped with their motor skills and problem-solving skills. Representatives from the City's Parks, Recreation & Tourism therapeutic programming department were there as volunteers to facilitate and guide the families through the stations at a pace that suited their needs and abilities. There was no cost for the experience, but registration was required to limit the wait times and crowds for participating families. Two families of no more than 6 individuals were allowed per time slot unless advanced notice and arrangements were provided. Each of the time slots were filled, as we were able to gently celebrate with many families who hadn't previously had the opportunity to have a controlled family experience with Santa such as this.

Detailed description of the DEI impact of the event/initiative

Typically, festival and event organizers measure the success of an event by the number of participants and/or generated revenue. That's what makes this event a bit counterintuitive, because the intent of this event was to keep participation levels at a minimum in order to best accommodate families who often have to forgo such a memorable experience that many of us take for granted. Among the 82 attendees, tears were shed, and hearts were filled beyond measure for both the families served as well as the event volunteers. That's a pretty satisfying measurement of success in our eyes, and there's a lot to be said for quality over quantity. It's also important to note that no costs were incurred during this impactful event - Santa was already scheduled to be in town during the festival, the space was provided through an in-kind sponsorship, and the supplies for the sensory bins were provided by the therapeutic programming department. Plans are in place for the Sensory Sensitive Santa Event to take place in the future, with the venue, sponsor, and volunteers already on board for 2023. Festival organizers are brainstorming ways in which more families within this often excluded community can enjoy this magical experience that will go into the memory bank forever!

Estimated number of attendees?

Testimonials or community feedback

A Parent's Perspective: "Christmasville's Sensory Sensitive Santa event was truly an amazingly memorable event for our family. Our youngest child is on the severe end of the Autism spectrum, has sensory processing disorder, and is nonverbal. We avoid many holiday events because of the crowds, noise, lights, etc. We've actually tried other special Santa events in years prior, but none of them compare to the joy we felt this year as we watched our little boy enjoy his own personal time with Santa. He sat beside him, hugged him, climbed on him, and his face lit up with a beautiful, beaming smile. The space was calm, dimly lit, and completely catered to families just like ours. There was no rush, and it felt like the whole world stopped just for us so he could share a visit with an absolutely precious Santa Claus. This event went above & beyond any expectations we had, and we will always be grateful for the joy we not only witnessed, but felt, as we watched our little guy enjoy Santa in a completely laid back environment that was perfectly suited to meet his needs and others who are quite often overlooked. It takes a unique and exceptional group of people to plan & coordinate an event for special needs families, and they blessed our family in a way we can never adequately express in words. It was exceptional!" Kristin Fairfax, an uplifted mom of a special little boy A

Volunteer's Perspective: "Seeing the joy on the faces of the children was beautiful, but what this event also had, was the joy of the parents. Many parents of special needs children rarely get to experience "traditional" holiday activities with their children. Having an event where the children AND the parents were comfortable was something amazing to watch. So many of the parents were thankful and some were in tears because their children have never been able to visit with Santa due to waiting in long lines, being overstimulated by lights, crowds, decorations or sounds, or even misbehaving because it is their only way to communicate. Santa Tony took his time with each child and allowed them to warm up to him on their own time, in their own way. One child even climbed up on his back to investigate Santa! Santa Tony communicated with one child through their adaptive communication device, and he communicated across the room with one child who was afraid by waving and gesturing. That child eventually became comfortable enough to sit next to Santa. In fact, every single child who attended that event sat with Santa. Many for the first time. One family even drove from out-of-state just to attend this event. While all of the activities were great, they worked because the organization and planning of this event was so well thought out that it made things run very smoothly. Every inch of the facility was arranged in a way that was not over-stimulating, the music was low, the furniture was moved away so there was a clear line of vision to allow the children to watch Santa, but that also offered an obstacle free, path with no trip hazards for people with different abilities to walk or roll through with plenty of room. The sofa and stage that Santa sat on allowed plenty of room for the whole family to sit and pose for photos. It is very rare for special needs families to have photos where the whole family is in the photo. Please count me in for helping from now on!!! Thank you for offering this all-inclusive activity." Terry Hagen, Volunteer & Recreation Programmer for Miracle Park



CHRISTMASVILLE SENSORY SENSITIVE SANTA

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IT FELT LIKE THE WHOLE WORLD
STOPPED JUST FOR US.

OUR FAMILY WAS BLESSED IN A WAY
WE CAN NEVER ADEQUATELY
EXPRESS IN WORDS.

