



ADALIVE!

EPISODE 66: Theme Parks and Accessibility

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Presenter: Judy Toth, Dollywood Parks and Resorts

Host: Rebecca Williams Southeast ADA Center

JUDY: Hi, I'm Judy Toth with Dollywood Parks and Resorts and you are listening to ADA Live!.

Music: [Car starting] Yo. [Car starting, helicopter whirling] [Music] [Car starting] All right, let's roll. Let's go. Wel-come to / Here we come [Music fades out].

REBECCA: Good afternoon, listeners. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, welcome to Episode 66 ADA Live. I'm Rebecca Williamson, Training and Technical Assistant with the southeast ADA Center. Before we begin this wonderful session, listeners can submit questions about accessibility at amusement parks at any time at ADALive.org.

According to an Open Doors 2015 market study, adults with disabilities spent \$17.3 billion annually on travel. Since many travel with others, the total economic impact is estimated at \$34.6 billion annually. That's a lot of potential revenue for businesses in the amusement industry.

Today, we are talking with Judy Toth from Dollywood Parks and Resorts about what they do to ensure people with disabilities have a memorable time at their park. Thank you for being here today, Judy, and sharing the services. Let's begin by learning a little bit about

Dollywood Parks and Resorts. How many parks and resorts do you have and how many visitors do the park resorts see each year?

JUDY: We have two parks. Dollywood Parks and Dollywood Parks Splash Country. Annually we see approximately 2.5 million visitors a year. We also have our Dream Well Resort and our Dollywood Parks Smoky Mountain Cabins. Overall we see around 4 million visitors.

REBECCA: Whoa, that is a lot of visitors. I notice when I was looking at Dollywood's website you have information about accessible features at your parks. When did the organization begin to look at ADA requirements and increasing access for guests with disabilities?

JUDY: We have always ensured we were in compliance. ADA compliance. However, in the last three years, we have really had an increased focus in our accessibility for all four properties.

REBECCA: And so can you tell us what some of the most common accessibility issues you run into there at Dollywood?

JUDY: One of the challenges was our indoor theaters. They were built pre-1989. So we work with the ushers and with guests to provide as best of an experience that we can to make our guests feel comfortable if they are in a wheelchair or electric wheelchair. Again, just to provide that hopefully that better experience as best as we can to make those accommodations.

REBECCA: Right, the readily achievable barrier removal sometimes takes effort and investigation to make that happen and be able to meet the standards.

In preparing for the episode, Judy, I saw that Dollywood has an accessibility guide. Tell us about the guide and what one may find on it?

JUDY: Absolutely. Our accessibility guide has information about the rider requirements for our rides. Detailed information. We talk about the available options for our hearing and vision impairment. Dietary needs. Also, our accessible restrooms. And we focus a

lot on our ride accessibility program which that program is for guests that are going to use the wheelchair entrance to our rides.

We have a center that they can actually come and visit our host and we talk about the rider requirements for each ride. So in other words, we will talk to them about if they should have a loss of limb or a prosthetic or have a cast or a brace, what they can safely participate in. And they receive a boarding pass for the day. And if they have any additional questions about other accessible options on park, that center is that information for those guests.

REBECCA: Judy, that's a lot of information in that guide. And I heard you mention something about dietary needs which is not something we at the Southeast ADA Center that we get many calls on from businesses looking into that. Can you jump a little more into what sort of things you looked at or mention in there with dietary needs?

JUDY: We have what we call a Start Fresh program. There is a phone number in the accessibility guide that the guest can reach out to the foods department and talk about their dietary needs as far as something that they may be allergic to and the Start Fresh program is actually at one of our restaurants. And the chef will actually create a meal and not cross contaminating anything that that guest may be allergic to.

REBECCA: That is really awesome because we do field questions from callers who have allergy, food allergies and that is often a big concern of the cross contamination or can I even go out with my family and be able to dine with them or do I have to bring my own food into the restaurant or the park. I think that is a really awesome program.

Something else that seemed to be a great amenity is social story/walk through guide and calming room. Tell us more about those features.

JUDY: Yes, because of the ride accessibility program, approximately three years ago we saw an increase of guests coming to visit our parks with autism and other cognitive disorders.

And as we talked to those guests, we understood their concerns of the noises, the crowds, and having to place or take their child or adult to, say, our first aid station just to get away from the crowds. And so I did a little digging, and just assumed that other parks had quiet rooms or calming rooms. And realized that that wasn't the case.

So I reached out to Autism Speaks and said this is what we would like to create here at Dollywood for these families that visit because they just want to provide that same experience as any other child or adult with or without autism. And why couldn't we create this space? So that's really where it began was just listening to our guests and wanting to have them stay at Dollywood, you know. We want to bring families closer together and what better way than to create this quiet space for them to take a break throughout the day should they need it.

And really piggybacking on that was the social story. We know that families are preplanners, they are visual planners, and so we wanted to create a social story or a social guide so that they would know before they come to the park that they have to go through our toll booth, they have to ride the tram. Going through bag check. All of that is a visual that's available for the families on our website.

Just to share some numbers with you over the past since we opened May of 2016 the calming room we had 362 families use the room. And over 300 new families have come because the room exists. And because our water park is right next door, families want to do -- they want to experience both parks so we created a calming area at our Dollywood Splash Country and it has been very successful.

REBECCA: There is a saying in the disability community nothing about us without us. And so Dollywood seemed to be very inclusive in also developing your calming room and your social story walk-through guide and my hats off to Dollywood for having the foresight to include people who work with those with autism and on the spectrum in the development of that wonderful feature.

ADA Live listening audience, if you have questions, you can submit your questions at any time online at ADALive.org. Now let's take a quick break.

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Dollywood is more than just a world class theme park, it is the complete gateway for families looking to disconnect from the world's distractions and reconnect with each other while nestled in the beautiful great Smoky Mountains. The properties provide many opportunities to overwrite life's daily stresses with new family memories. The Dollywood Theme Park, Smoky Mountain cabins, the Dream More Resort, the Dolly Parton stampede show. For more information, visit www.Dollywood.com.

REBECCA: Before the break you were telling us about the social story walk-through guide and calming room available at Dollywood. Is there also a rider requirement chart and explain about the chart and how it is used?

JUDY: The ride chart, what it is, it lists each individual ride, what the rider requirements are such as height. Again, it talks about our loss of limb, prosthetic information.

And it is a detailed -- what the detailed ride experience would be for each of those rides. You can also find it -- the guests can find it at the ride accessibility center when they do visit the park.

REBECCA: Great. Thank you, Judy. And I also see from the website you offer several guest services for guests who are deaf or hard of hearing. Will you talk a little bit about those services?

JUDY: Yes. We actually offer what we call show scripts. They are available for our guests. They just need to see one of the theater ushers or a technician.

We also have listening devices. And a guest can talk or can call Dollywood two weeks in advance and we can reserve an interpreter for the shows.

REBECCA: Awesome. Now, I know you have the Splash Country there. Do any of the water features at Dollywood Splash Country have an accessible means of egress into the water feature?

JUDY: Yes, absolutely they do. We have a wave pool and lazy river. And they also added special water tubes with special seats for guests with limited lower or upper mobility. We have them for adults and we have them for children. They can see any of the hosts at Splash Country and they can be used in the wave pool and lazy river. They also added last year an aquatic chair so a guest that has come with their personal wheelchair can transfer into the aquatic chair and be taken up to the edge of the wave pool and lazy river to transfer into one of the water tubes.

And addition to that, they added adult changing tables. Dollywood two years ago added three adult changing tables. And three different locations. Very accessible. And then they added -- Splash Country added those last year. And also Splash Country added last year an aquatic chair. They can transfer into the aquatic chair and they will be wheeled at the very edge of the wave pool and the lazy river and can safely transfer into one of our water tubes.

REBECCA: I got to tell you, Judy, I am really impressed. I had not heard of any other amusement park or recreational facility like this that has as many inclusive and accessible features as Dollywood and I think you guys are in the forefront of providing adult changing tables. That has been an issue and one of the things we get phone calls on that occasionally and that will be a great feature for your guests that have family members who need that type of feature. So again, I am really impressed with some of these inclusive features that you guys have added here at Dollywood.

Going along with that, seems as though Dollywood has really put a lot of time and thought and effort into meeting ADA requirements and maybe even going a little bit above to ensure that all of your guests have an enjoyable accessible and memorable experience. I know you did mention that you did work with Autism Speaks in the calming room. Did the park include any other individuals with disabilities or groups that work with people with disabilities in helping develop your guides and your accessible features?

JUDY: Yes. Actually, we created what we call an advisory panel. So it is -- it represents guests that frequent the park that we have met at the ride accessibility center. There are varying disabilities amongst the guests.

And they are our eyes and our ears for our four properties. We meet every month. It is a roundtable discussion. We talk about what's working, what's not working, we look at things that we may take for granted like signage, where it's placed. And it's -- it's like a fellowship as well.

We also invite the Knoxville Autism Society and work with them and other local resources. Again, it is listening to the guest needs. If we can make those accommodations and safely participate.

REBECCA: Thank you very much for sharing that information, Judy. And I know there is so much to see and do at Dollywood that I would imagine many of your visitors opt to spend a night or two there, that one day is just not enough. Can you describe accessible features of the resort or cabins?

JUDY: We do have a cabin that is one floor, very accessible. ADA accessible. It has two bedrooms. The bathroom is set up for roll in, to roll in the wheelchair and it has a bench as well as the kitchen is ADA.

And for our Dream Resort we have options of the roll in shower with benches and the indoor pool has a pool lift.

REBECCA: Very good. Very good. I want to give you the opportunity to share anything else with the listening audience that we may not have covered that I might not have asked you about. Any other particular amenity or feature that you think might be kind of different and only offered there by Dollywood that you would like to share with us.

JUDY: Yes, actually, I would like to share a story with you. And you know, we get such great ideas, first of all, from the advisory panel.

One of the family members that I would like to share the story with you is the Taylor family. They have a daughter Mary with Down Syndrome. She is in her 20's. And they are from New York.

They were in Nashville and saw an advertisement for Dollywood. Mary loves country music. She is nonverbal, doesn't really interact with people. But they knew that she loved country music so they took a chance and brought her to Dollywood.

And she fell in love with the entertainment, the music. And so they decided to come back the next year. And they stayed a week and came every day and then the next year they decided to come for a month. They purchased a camper. And I'm going to fast forward to today.

Now they live here in Tennessee. Mary speaks. She comes in to the ride accessibility center. She gets her own boarding pass so she writes her name. She sometimes leaves a message on her boarding pass that may say I love you or it may say I got to stay up late last night.

And they come to the park every day. So when I tell this story, I only say look at the impact that your hosts are making on families that are visiting you. It is just incredible.

REBECCA: Thank you, Judy, for sharing that wonderful story about Mary Taylor and her family. This just proves the efforts that Dollywood has gone to, to make all of your park facilities there accessible and useable and enjoyable by the whole family. You reached out and you have provided accessibility features for children and adults in all areas of Dollywood. And so it's -- I think a lot of us in here listening today probably are going to be like well, I got to get here and enjoy some of those wonderful features that you have. Once again, thank you for sharing all of the stories with us and just how involved everyone is at Dollywood at being inclusive for all of your guests. And again, making those family memories that people can look back on and share together.

But that is a great story. Thank you for sharing that. And listeners, our guest for this episode of ADA Live has been Judy Toth, Dollywood Parks and Resorts. As always, we thank you for joining us for this episode of ADA Live. This episode and all previous episodes are available on our website at ADALive.org. All episodes are archived in a variety of formats including streamed audio and accessible transcripts and you can download as a podcast. Go to the podcast on your mobile device and search for ADA

Live. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, submit your questions online at ADALive.org or contact your regional ADA Center at 1-800-949-4232. And remember, all calls are free and they are confidential.

ADA Live! is a program of the Southeast ADA Center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda, with Beth Harrison, Mary Morder, Emily Rueber, Marsha Schwanke, and Barry Whaley. Our music is from 4 Wheel City, the Movement for Improvement. Hope to see you all next episode!

[Music]

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