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S8 E9: Knoebels Amusement Park with Stacy Yutko

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Transcript

Lisa Dieker

Welcome to Practical Access. I'm Lisa Diecker.

Rebecca Hines

And I'm Rebecca Hines. And Lisa, finally, in a rare event, we're featuring someone who is not from Orlando, and also not one of our close friends that we like to interview. And this is an exciting episode. Who do we have?

Lisa Dieker

So, we have with us today, Stacy Yutko, and she is the public relations director for Knoebels Park that is accessible for all. So, Stacy, welcome, we're so excited to have you.

Stacy Yutko

So happy to be here and we will become one of your very good friends now after that.

Lisa Dieker

Yes, exactly. I know I was just in Pennsylvania this past week, so, I'm gonna have to be heading that direction. So, tell us a little bit about where you're located and a little bit about your park to get us started.

Stacy Yutko

Sure. So, we are in the heart of Pennsylvania, and we are America's largest free admission amusement park. We opened in 1926 with a steam powered carousel, a 900,000 gallon pool and a few food stands. And we have grown today to have nearly 60 rides, over two dozen food stands, we have shops, games, a campground attached to the amusement park, an 18 hole golf course down the road. So, we've really morphed into a large resort.

Rebecca Hines

Well, I hate to ask the obvious. But how do you offer all of this for free?

Stacy Yutko

A lot of parks back in the day, around the time that Knoebels had its start, followed this free admission model. So, you would pay per ride and really select what you want to do while you're visiting. So, we've stuck with that model, a lot of parks have gone to a gate- or admission-based model, but it was really important for us to maintain that that free admission status. So, you pretty much can select exactly what you would like to pick is yourfun while you're at our park.

Rebecca Hines

That's great. So if I'm a parent or if I have a child who doesn't want to go on rides at all, I'm not, I don't have to pay? I can just pay for my child as he or she pleases, correct?

Stacy Yutko

Exactly, exactly. You could also bring your own picnic lunch. We offer free picnic facilities and free entertainment within the park. So say you have a, you know, picky eater within the family. You know you can pack your own lunch for exactly what the kiddo might want to snack on throughout the day.

Rebecca Hines

And that that really works perfectly with a lot of the kids that we that we work with and that we see.

Stacy Yutko

And by nature, Knoebels has always been this sort of inclusive environment with our free admission model and the ability to bring your own food and really come and go as you please. With our campground attached to the amusement park. A lot of families will come down into the park for short periods of time and then go back and relax and pull down at their campsite and come back later.

Lisa Dieker

So I love that open choose your own adventure. We're really big on that option of choice for everyone, but especially for people with unique abilities. And so one of my questions for you is, you know I see lots of great things about you know, service animals, all those things that we would expect all theme parks to celebrate. But are there unique things at your park that as I enter as a parent that I should be aware of, that might even help further make this a fun experience for my child?

Stacy Yutko

So something really fun and you mentioned the service animals, but we are one of the few parks that we're aware of that actually all pets are allowed within the park. All well behaved pets. But to take that a step further, there are several rides that you can actually bring your pet on with you. So our Pioneer Train, our motorboats, our carousels, they've Chariots on them. So, yes, both the pets and service animals alike are able to actually experience that ride with you. So that makes for a really neat experience. But we also have an accessibility program through IBCCES and that has really helped us take these efforts to the to the next level. So guests in advance can register for this program through their website and they visit guest services and upon visiting guest services they received a an accessibility pass really, that they can enter the rides through the exit without having to wait in a line.

Lisa Dieker

And is there any like sensory areas or anything unique and that in the park as I wander through like I I'm really wanting to drive there right now. So I can get it, you have to choose you own adventure.

Stacy Yutko

One of the Knoebels family members actually has a daughter who has autism. And so, you know, we, we started several years ago an Autism Day here at the park, and it really started off that we had maybe a handful of vendors that offered services for individuals who have autism, when they would come and set up and provide information to our guests. And on that day, we would have several sensory friendly areas set up throughout the park, as a way to, you know, kind of just take a break from the hustle and bustle of an amusement park, and through going through the process with IBCCES, we actually

incorporated a more permanent sensory friendly area. And that building that it's currently in was an attraction here at the park that was unfortunately closed due to staffing during COVID. But it has actually been there for three years now, and we are making plans now for the future to have a more permanent facility devoted to being as a sensory friendly area within the park. So yes, we do have a sensory friendly area. It was initially a temporary location. But it has become a three-year project for us here.

Rebecca Hines

For your guests with physical disabilities or, you know, do you have rides that are accessible for someone who may not have trunk support? Maybe you know, in a wheelchair, really difficult to physically manage, you know, especially as kids get older. Do you have some things that that are suitable for that type of a population.

Stacy Yutko

So we are always looking for new ways to have opportunities like this for our guests. At this time, there are a few, you know, a few rides that that may be able to depending, it really it really depends on the specific but it, you know, we don't necessarily have anything specifically devoted to that. We do have you mentioned as the children get older or maybe even adults within the family, we do have an adult care facility within the park as well. It's nearby our pizza stand, so you know, guests are able to care for their adult loved ones that might need a facility like that as well.

Lisa Dieker

I love. It and so one of the things I notice is just, you know, lots of ways to stay and play and water slides. And I mean, you know it, it looks like the fun is endless. And that's great. What would be an average cost for a family if I just wanted to come to the park versus maybe I want to stay a couple of days. Do you have kind of a standard range for our families who might want to travel in that area and say, you know, where does this fit in my budget? I just think that might be helpful to the listeners.

Stacy Yutko

So it really depends as we mentioned before, you do have the option if you want to visit during the week, we do have a ride pass that you could pay 1 price to ride unlimited rides. But we also have the ability to pay per ride, so if someone just wants to ride the Pioneer train, you know, it's just a few dollars to ride the Pioneer train. It it's a big help. We have a new app, and we also have an accessible website of course that guests can plan their visit and see our menu items that are available and plan all this in advance which you know I think is a big help to guests to be able to see the rides in advance, and you know, see what food options are available to them, and plan this prior to a visit. The pool that you mentioned, we actually have a zero depth entry pool as well for our guests. So if you are interested in just using the pool without the water slides you could do that for under \$10 per person and enjoy the pool for you know for a day from 11:00 AM until 6:00 PM. And if you want to add the water slides, it takes it up to \$13.00 to enjoy the water slides. The campground, we have primitive sites that you can bring a tent, but we also have some handicap accessible cabins that are available for rent and some cottages as well. So we really offer the whole range of, we say, you mentioned pick your fun. You know, if you can think of something that you would enjoy, chances are we have. OK.

Lisa Dieker

And I can imagine a couple of my friends riding the train all day long. So, is it once I pay, can I just stay on forever?

Stacy Yutko

Unfortunately, not the visiting through a weekday, that's something else. We actually had a guest reach out recently and say, you know, I have a child who has autism and we're thinking about visiting for the first time. We've heard about, you know, your program accessibility program at the park. You know when do you recommend that we visit, and definitely Tuesday through Thursday are typically the slowest days as far as, you know, the Saturdays are about as busy as we'll get in a season, but definitely visiting Tuesdays through Thursdays provides a slower experience as far as the hustle and bustle of the park goes.

Rebecca Hines

And what is your season? Are you closed down in the winter? I know you're...

Lisa Dieker

They have snow skiing Dr. Hines.

Stacy Yutko

So we typically open the last weekend in April, and it's weekends only until Memorial Day, and then we are open daily from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and then weekends in September and October. And something else that's new for the park is the amusement park itself is not open, but we now have a drive through Christmas light display, it starts the day after Thanksgiving and goes until just around New Year and the guests can drive through a beautiful light display through the park as well.

Lisa Dieker

That's awesome. Well, my last question for you is of all the things you see people come with kids with their range of diverse abilities and disabilities. What's the one like, don't forget to go to blank. Like, what is it you've seen be this the heart and the soul and the center for people in the park. I'm sure there's lots of great opportunities, but I'm already thinking about all the rides, 2000 food stands. I'm like, what should I eat? Where should I go first? But what's one thing you're like don't miss blank?

Stacy Yutko

First, so I recommend that you stop at our guest service locations when you arrive. Our team at guest services just like the rest of our team actually they have taken part in some training that will help better understand the needs of our guests. And they could definitely help pinpoint where to go, what to see and really base that on an individual guest.

Rebecca Hines

Love it? Well, we appreciate your attention to making sure that everybody is accommodated, and I hope that I hope that more places take that universal design approach so that everybody can enjoy the park.

Stacy Yutko

It's a, it's something that, like I mentioned before, it was within the nature of the park just by how we operate. But you know, with the becoming a certified autism center, just having that ability based on our nature wasn't enough. We wanted to do more.

Lisa Dieker

Well, we thank you not only for doing more, but we encourage families, friends, it sounds like young and old, to come out and have a great time and to choose your own adventure. So we appreciate you taking the time, Stacy, and we appreciate the Knoebels creating a world that is an example for the rest of the world. So thank you so much for joining us. And if you have questions, you can post them on our Facebook page at practical access or you can tweet at accesspractical and we'll be sure to put a link to the park out for our listeners in case they are driving through Pennsylvania because I know my car is heading that way when I get there.

Rebecca Hines

Thanks, Stacy. Thank you.