



For Immediate Release
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New Mexico State Fair Receives Prestigious Merrill Award for New “Sensory Station”
Partnership with Autism Society Created Comfortable and Engaging Space for Special Needs Fairgoers

Last Friday evening in Anaheim, California, the Western Fairs Association announced that the New Mexico State Fair (NMSF) was this year’s winner of the prestigious Merrill Award. NMSF won the award for our new program which was launched as part of the 2017 fair to enhance the fair experience for all our visitors, including those with special needs or who may require accommodations. The Merrill Award is given to those fairs that demonstrate “innovation, vision and excellence.”

The new “New Mexico State Fair Sensory Station” provided a safe space for sensory sensitive and special needs fair guests to de-escalate, and provided low-key and helpful sensory input activities. In addition to sensory input activities, there were regular visits with the kids from the State Fair Ambassadors (therapy dogs) and meet and greets with the State Fair queen. The Sensory Station was set up in the Youth Hall and open 10-6 daily for the full run of the fair.

The fair can be overwhelming for some guests, that’s why we teamed up with New Mexico Autism Society and other local organizations to provide a space where families could take a break from the crowds and noise. The Autism Society provided critical feedback and guidance to ensure the new station provided the best experience for those guests with special needs.

“We were happy to be included among a very distinguished list of fairs in competition for this award. What we think set us apart from the others was the fact that our initiative was focused on making the state fair a fun and memorable experience for all fairgoers, including those who may require additional accommodations. We are extremely proud that our efforts have been acknowledged in this way and will serve as a benchmark for other big events throughout the region,” said Dan Mourning, General Manager of the NMSF.

"Providing an accommodation like the 'Sensory Station' at the State Fair is a huge step towards inclusion, awareness, acceptance and opportunity in the community! We could not be more proud that New Mexico's own State Fair is leading the way and setting this example for other fairs throughout the United States and this award speaks volumes to their success in this regard," said Sarah Baca, Director of the New Mexico Autism Society.

In addition to the active involvement of the autism society, several other organizations and individuals stepped up to volunteer their time and expertise at the Sensory Station. They included the following:

- Autism Learning Partners
- Autism Spectrum Therapies
- Behavior Change Institute
- Bridges
- Centria
- Chatterbox
- ExplorAbilities
- KidPower
- Pathways Academy
- New Mexico Autism Society Board of Directors
- UNM-CDD
- Explora
- Rio Grande Foam

Information regarding the Merrill Award and the NMSF submission can be found via the following link:
www.westernfairs.org/p/convention/awards/merrill

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