Common Senses

Omaha | 2022



Common Senses

Omaha | 2022 | April 1 – May 1

31 days

37 events and
9 installations

Over 5,500
attended festival events

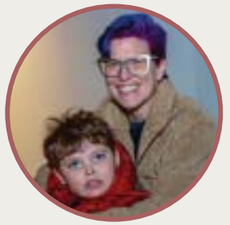
Visitors from
225 zip codes and
26 different states

Average daily attendance at KANEKO:
180 visitors









A message from Kate Noble Weitz,

Director of Common Senses Festival

"In April 2018, my husband Roger and I took our son, Freddie, to New York for the Big Umbrella Festival. Big Umbrella, produced by The Lincoln Center, was an entire arts festival designed specifically for children on the autism spectrum. While our whole family participated and enjoyed ourselves, particularly the theater performances, I had two nagging thoughts once we left New York. First, I was upset we had to travel so far to give our son this experience. Second, I was discouraged that the broader community was not somehow incorporated into the festival. What was the impact if participants attended a performance and just left? I had the feeling that Omaha could support a similar festival, but in a way that was more meaningful and could foster change.

Shortly after returning from New York, I approached Autism Action Partnership's CEO Justin Dougherty and community volunteer Michael Hollins about partnering for this yet unnamed 'event.' Fast forward two years of planning, global pandemic, cancellations, another year and half of planning and then finally the opening of the Common Senses Festival. I'm thrilled to report that over 5,500 participants experienced the installations at the KANEKO and Millwork Commons, plus attended symposiums and sensory friendly performances all over the city.

One of the highlights for my family was the magical production of UP AND AWAY at the Rose Theater. Common Senses/ Autism Action Partnership worked with the Rose Theater to license the rights to the theater production of UP AND AWAY – one of the shows that Freddie loved in New York which was created specifically for audiences on the autism spectrum.

Over 400 local families were able to attend the show, I am heartened that so many of my son's peers and their families were able to experience what was one of the catalysts behind Common Senses.

Finally, I am so very grateful to all of our donors, partners and volunteers that put forth so much time, treasure and talent to ensure the Festival's success. Most of all I am grateful for everyone that embraced this idea. Common Senses Festival 2022 was the perfect launch pad to foster greater collaboration between individuals and families affected by autism and the entire Omaha community.



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AAP's Role + Mission

A message from Justin Dougherty,

President/CEO of Autism Action Partnership

Autism Action Partnership (AAP) exists to improve the quality of life for members of the autism community.

As such, it should come as no surprise that we offer a variety of high-quality programs and services to autistic individuals of all ages and their families.

What may not be as obvious, is that we also spend a significant amount of time and resources working with community members with no direct connection to autism. We do so because we believe AAP's mission will never be achieved if we only serve the autism community.

This belief has been the driving force behind the continued expansion of our Training and Inclusion efforts, as well as the creation of numerous strategic partnerships.

As an extension of AAP's mission, the above-stated approach was also used in the design and implementation of the Common Senses Festival. Our intent was to cultivate content and events that allowed for unique experiences for the autism community, as well as experiences that all members of our community could enjoy. Based on the attendance and feedback gathered from attendees, we are confident it was a success. As with so many other successful events and initiatives AAP has brought to fruition, we did not do it alone. We celebrate this success with an expansive list of sponsors and trusted partners, who lent their support and expertise to the Festival.

One final and very important note: Although the Common Senses Festival had an end date, the long-term goals of the Festival and the mission of AAP have yet to be achieved. The Festival served as a significant catalyst toward the advancement of understanding and acceptance of autism in our community. Much remains to be done, and all are invited to join in this ongoing effort.

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Branding

Common Senses

Common Senses Festival was the first of its kind. Creating interest and awareness for such a novel concept presented a challenge in educating the public not just on the key details of the festival, but also on the very purpose and goals of the event.

One of the goals of the Festival was to advance the general public's consideration of how their senses determine how they experience everything around them…and that differences in sensory processing create unique experiences for people in the same environment. The design of the brand elements, the name "Common Senses", and messaging like, "We are all similar. We are all unique." were all chosen with this primary goal in mind.

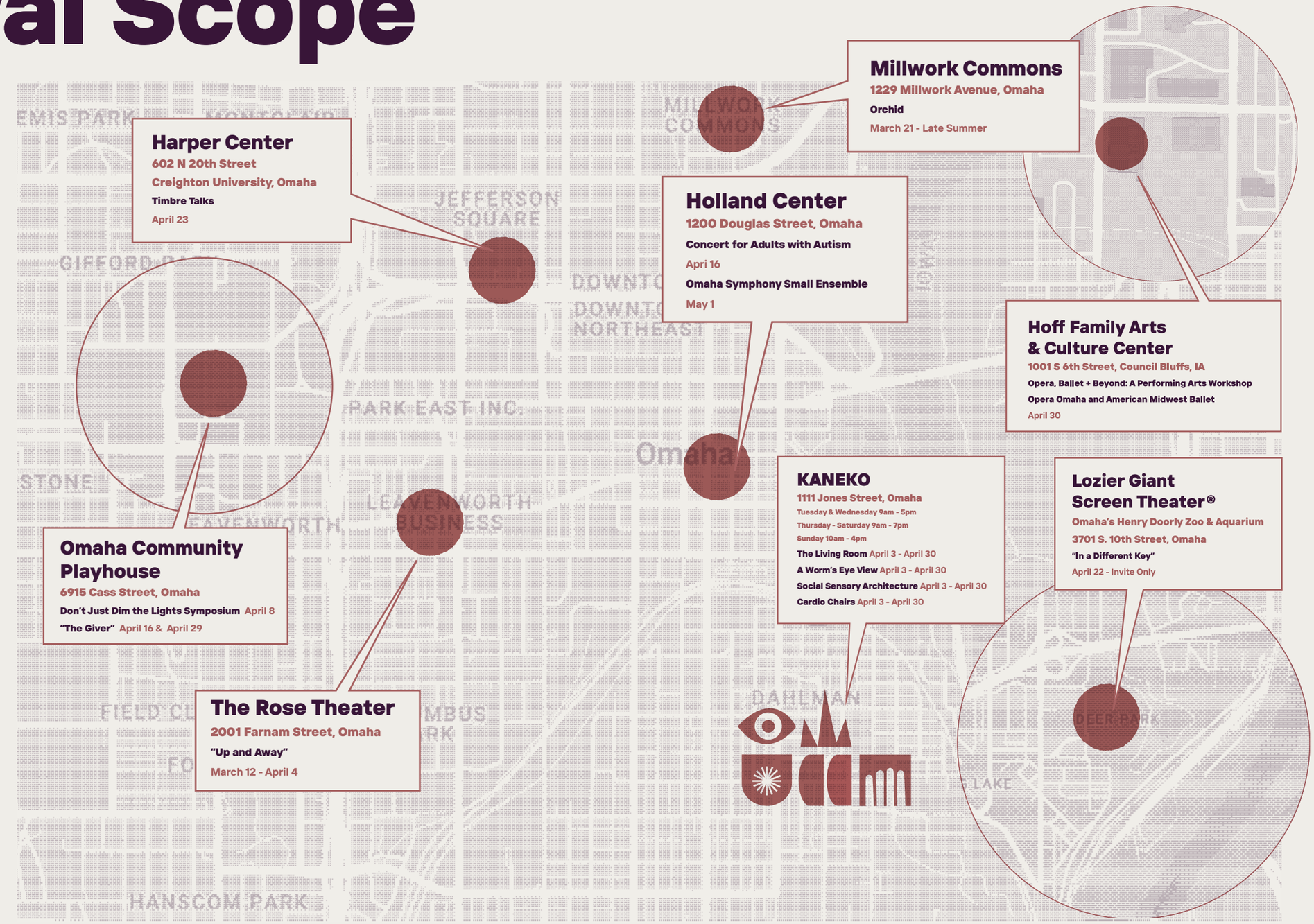
Sight Hear Smell Taste Touch

Festival Scope

A main objective of Common Senses Festival was to educate the public on sensory differences within neurodivergent populations.

In order to broaden Common Senses Festival's reach it was important to extend beyond one location and expand to multiple sites in the downtown and midtown areas.

This expansion not only left more impressions and generated interested, but it led to Common Senses Festival andAutism Action Partnership forging new relationships with other arts and service organizations.



Leadership



Justin Dougherty

President/CEO of Autism Action Partnership



Kate Noble Weitz

Director of Common Senses Festival



Michael Hollins

Coordinator of Common Senses Festival

Sponsors

PRESENTING:

Anonymous

Pape Family Foundation

Weitz Family Foundation

BENEFACTOR:

Bay Family Foundation

The Fred and Eve Simon Charitable Foundation

Holland Foundation

Omaha Steaks

INCLUSIVITY:

The Hawks Foundation

Heider Family Foundation

Sarah and Adam Yale

SENSORY:

Esther and Dan Brabec

Harley & Beth Schrager Foundation

Susan and Mike Lebens

Paul and Annette Smith

EXPERIENCE:

Jamie and Ted Friedland

Nancy and Mike McCarthy

Munroe-Meyer Institute

Nebraska Arts Council & Nebraska Cultural Endowment

Partners

Photo Credit: Debra S. Kaplan

Creatives



Sean Ahlquist

Social Sensory Architecture & Orchid (on display at Millwork Commons)

Associate Professor of Architecture | University of Michigan – Taubman College of Architecture & Urban Planning



John Donvan

In A Different Key Panelist

Co-Director and Co-Producer



Stephanie Keeney Parks

In A Different Key Panelist

Doctoral Candidate | UCLA



Amy Lutz

In A Different Key Panelist

Author



James Coleman

The Living Room & Cardio Chairs

Doctoral Student | Princeton University



Matthew Goodwin, PhD

The Living Room & Cardio Chairs

Interdisciplinary Associate Professor | Northeastern University



Adam Larsen

A Worm's Eye View & Common Voices

Video Projection Designer | Hum-Bar Productions



Lisa Porter

Arts & Inclusion Symposium Presenter

Professor of Theatre and Dance | University of California, San Diego

Creighton University

Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy Departments



Roger Ideishi JD, OT/L

Arts & Inclusion Symposium Presenter

Director of Occupational Therapy | George Washington University



Matthew Lerner, Ph.D

Arts & Inclusion Symposium Presenter

Associate Professor of Psychology | Stony Brook University



Caren Zucker

In A Different Key Panelist

Co-Director and Co-Producer



Installations + Special Events

> *As a parent of an autistic child, I hope [the installations] gave attendees a lot of things to think about and look at people with autism a little differently after they left.*
>
> *What an incredible event! Our son has been to the installations and has been engrossed in all of them. Today was his third trip this month.*

INSTALLATIONS

Social Sensory Structures

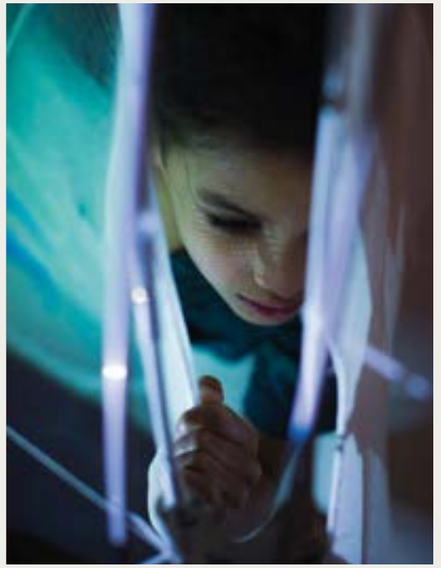
Interactive social sensory structures allow individuals to express themselves creatively. These structures integrate architecture, structural engineering, computer vision, human-computer interactions, and kinesiology to engage neurodiverse and neurotypical individuals to facilitate social interaction.



There is almost no right or wrong way to engage with the structures.

This provides an environment where the unique approach by individuals with autism can be celebrated and encouraged, instead of judged as being wrong or atypical. Guests were encouraged to interact with four unique structures and consider how each could be utilized by individuals with autism, and others who are differently-abled, to connect with peers and loved ones.







Orchid

Sponsored by The Fred and Eve Simon Charitable Foundation and Omaha Steaks

The Orchid was the fourth social sensory structure, created by Sean Ahlquist.

Its design was unique in many ways: largest structure, colorful fabric, intended to be outdoors, and incorporated numerous sensory elements.

Omaha was the third city to host The Orchid, having previously been on display in Venice, Italy, and New York City. This interactive structure was also unique to the Festival, as it was on display (at Millwork Commons) from March through mid-August.









INSTALLATIONS

The Living Room + Cardio Chairs







The Living Room + Cardio Chairs exhibits showed two components of a ground-breaking effort to leverage technology in order to create indoor environments that adapt to the needs and wants of an individual.

For individuals on the spectrum, many of whose well-being can be impacted by their surroundings, this interactive technology could significantly improve their quality of life. Advancements in technology now allow for personalized adjustments in the ambient environment through light, sound, and other sensorial stimuli, at reasonable costs.





Cardio Chairs

The Cardio Chairs exhibit showed visitors that their biometrics (heart rate, body temperature, etc.) tell a story about what/how they are feeling and that this story can be "told", without words, using groundbreaking technology. The Cardio Chairs would tell this story by lighting up different colors based on unique information of the individual sitting in the chair, with their hands on specially designed sensors. This technological advancement is critical for those with a limited ability to communicate verbally, as it can tell their story to a caregiver.

The Living Room

Instead of expecting people to adapt to their environment. The Living Room exhibit showed how indoor environments can be made adaptable, using the same technology as Cardio Chairs. Instead of lights within a chair changing colors based on an individual's biometric readings, The Living Room gave visitors examples of different lighting and scene configurations and asked them to reflect on how each made them feel.









INSTALLATIONS

A Worm's Eye View + Common Voices

A Worm's Eye View

Sponsored by: Cindy & Mogens Bay

A Worm's Eye View celebrated the subtle intricacies of our surroundings that are too often overlooked. In the world of autism, these details can hold more importance than the big picture. In the 360° video installation, filmmaker Adam Larsen allowed visitors to become immersed in the spectacular details of the great outdoors, and consider how others may have a different experience in the same environment.

Common Voices

The Common Voices exhibit shared the voice of the autism community with all visitors. Using interview footage from cinematographer Adam Larsen's two documentaries, Neurotypical and Undersung, autistic adults shared insights into how they perceive and navigate the world. As an added sensorial experience, viewers could only hear the exhibit when standing in an identified area beneath a sound dome speaker.



Sensory 101

Instructors and students from the Creighton University's Departments of Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy designed an installation to educate the public about how professionals assist those with sensory needs.

The exhibit highlighted the variety of intervention tools and techniques used by professionals, caregivers and individuals to maximize comfort and promote self-regulation.

Visitors were encouraged to engage with the items to better understand their (and others) proprioception and interoception. Creighton students facilitated the installation at scheduled intervals throughout the Festival to offer additional insight into their work and the exhibit.













SPECIAL EVENTS

Up and Away

"Up and Away" is an immersive production designed specifically for young audiences on the autism spectrum by a renowned New York City theater company. Featuring puppetry, live music, and interactive play, this experience takes young "balloonists" and their adult sidekicks on an adventure above the clouds.

Completely and utterly magical! My son loved the intimate interaction.

This was such an amazing, inclusive experience! My child could be loud and excited and happy without judgment!

Everyone loved on [my child] so much – it made me cry when no one was looking.

So special to have a show that celebrates the unique perspective of our child! Often shows make accommodations, but to have an entire show that respects and celebrates those accommodations – more special than you can imagine.

Today proved that balloon flights are for everyone- the ages of our balloonists ranged from 2 to 57!

100%
of attendees reported the show met or exceeded expectations

400
families attended

29
shows performed for neurodivergent audiences

Don't Just Dim the Lights:

How to Create Inclusive Environments in the Arts for All to Enjoy

Professionals from the Arts and Entertainment sector were invited to a half-day symposium, featuring three nationally recognized experts in creating truly inclusive environments and experiences for individuals with cognitive disabilities and/or sensory sensitivities. Presenters Roger Iedishi, Matthew Lerner, and Lisa Porter shared not only how to create inclusive experiences, but equally as important – the why.

100%
of attendees reported the symposium increased their motivation to apply new knowledge of sensory processing in their organization

29
organizations represented at the symposium





"What was discussed definitely has applications beyond the arts and theater!"











SPECIAL EVENTS

In a Different Key Screening

Sponsored by:
Sarah and Adam Yale

This special evening began with a screening of *In A Different Key*, a documentary following a mother who tracks down the first person ever diagnosed with autism to a rural Mississippi town to learn whether his life story holds promise for her own autistic son. Following the film was a talkback with film producers/directors, Caren Zucker and John Donvan, and two individuals featured in the film, Stephanie Keeney Parks and Amy Lutz.



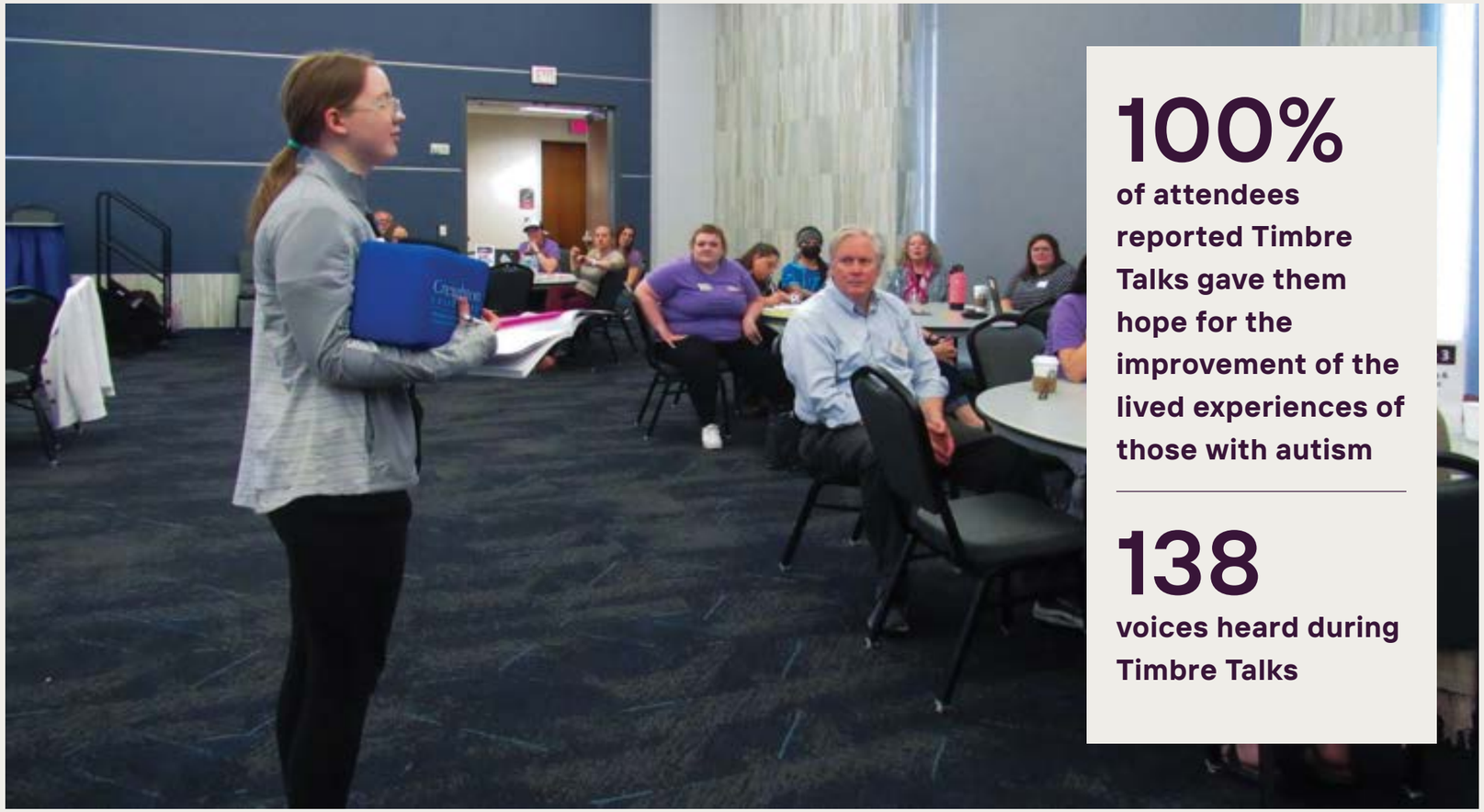




SPECIAL EVENTS

Timbre Talks

Timbre Talks was a three-part effort to gather the voice of the local autism community and use it to influence and inform the efforts of Autism Action Partnership. The effort began by inviting the autism community to complete a comprehensive survey, regarding their experiences and insights. The results of the survey were then reviewed and discussed during two "Community Conversations", where additional feedback was gathered, and priority items selected. These two steps informed the final component of Timbre Talks, which was a day-long facilitated discussion focusing on what improvements can be made regarding the priority items. A detailed summary of the entire Timbre Talks effort and key takeaways was created and is available to the public.



100%

of attendees reported Timbre Talks gave them hope for the improvement of the lived experiences of those with autism

138

voices heard during Timbre Talks

I am feeling so positive about where we are headed in Omaha and look forward to sharing so it can resonate throughout the state.

Event organizers went to great lengths to provide a safe space for people to be honest and forthright.







SPECIAL EVENTS

Enrichment Events

Common Senses Festival and Autism Action Partnership were joined by many community partners who hosted sensory-friendly performances and experiences for neurodivergent individuals and their families. These include the Omaha Symphony Concert for Children, the Omaha Symphony Small Ensemble Concert for Adults, The Giver at Omaha Community Playhouse, Opera, Ballet, + Beyond: A Performing Arts Workshop with Opera Omaha and American Midwest Ballet.

> *[Our child] had a safe space to experience live symphonic music without any judgment should she make noise or wiggle!*













World Autism Day

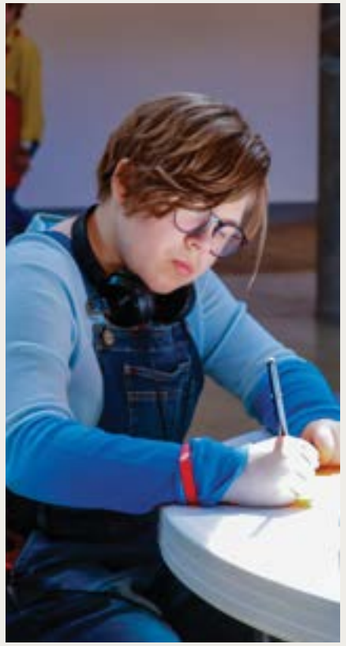
Over 200 members of the autism community experienced an exclusive look at Common Senses Festival installations at KANEKO on World Autism Day, April 2, 2022. This event was hosted by Autism Action Partnership, in collaboration with Munroe-Meyer Institute. In addition to the celebration and first look at installations, we were joined by WhyArts, who led dance and visual arts workshops for attendees to enjoy.

100%
of attendees enjoyed the World Autism Day event













Ripple Effect

Common Senses Festival had an immediate impact on our community – particularly by families affected by autism.

The overwhelmingly positive reviews from the World Autism Day and enrichment events prove that the Festival filled an existing void in Omaha.

The lasting and compounding impact of this effort can be seen in the number of partner organizations who engaged in the Festival — whether by contributing to the installations, creating new sensory-friendly audience content or participating in Festival events. This served as a catalyst for the expansion of inclusive venues, productions, programs and other opportunities for the neurodivergent population.

Autism Action Partnership looks forward to leading this ongoing effort to make our community inclusive for all.

Autism
Action
Partnership

commonsensesfestival.com