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Inside the State Fair's Fraser Sensory Building

The semi-new space is a haven for fairgoers in need of a breather—and a stepping stone in building a more equitable Fair overall.

by Madison Bloomquist



It should go without saying that the State Fair is a sensory-overload experience. Bright flashing lights, a thousand sounds and smells at one time, (often) high heat and humidity, oh, and record-setting crowds can be overwhelming for everyone. But for people with any kind of sensory sensitivities, heading to the Fair can be a mental risk they're not comfortable taking.

But Fraser, a local nonprofit that advocates for and aids people with different physical, intellectual, and emotional needs, is setting out to change that. The group's first step? The Fraser Sensory Building.

The building—formerly a fireplace showroom, near the Home Improvement Building on Cosgrove Street—opened in 2021, celebrating the nonprofit's commitment to helping people of all abilities thrive. "That year we had some initial conversations with the State Fair, wanting to provide a space for people to go if they were overwhelmed by all of the stimuli they might encounter," says Gina Brady, Fraser's sensory supports and training program manager. "They provided us with this option, and it needed a lot of love. It was actually quite hazardous—and that's a gentle way of putting it."

Luckily, Fraser knew who to call: Jason Stock, owner of Central Roofing Company, a longtime Fraser board member and construction partner. Two of Stock's children are on the autism spectrum, and he immediately knew what Fraser wanted to bring to the Fair—and why the current situation wouldn't do. "It was five, six weeks before the fair was supposed to start, and I walked into the hottest mess I've ever seen in my life," Stock says. "I wouldn't have put my children in that building."

After removing hazards like stone surrounds and exposed gas and electrical hookups, repairing a giant crack in the floor, and reworking the interior into a usable space, Central Roofing and Fraser opened the building each day of the fair, providing interactive sensory tools and quiet, dark space—as well as trained staff who could help families and individuals in need. But they knew they were ready to improve for 2022 and 2023, once they had a little more time to plan.

Now, Fraser divides the building into two parts. The front half includes multiple kinds of sensory components used to help folks self-regulate: fidgets and interactive elements to jump on, feel, spin, and play with, for example. The back half of the building is darker and quieter, complete with swings, weighted items, noise-cancelling headphones, and beanbag chairs. Every day, Fraser staff, occupational and physical therapists, and speech therapists staff the building to ensure fairgoers are getting the resources they need—whatever that may be.

"There's no sort of diagnosis requirement," Brady says of who can utilize the center's tools. "We aim to be inclusive—and that's for everyone. We focus on sensory processing, because that's a big umbrella that includes so many different life experiences. We see babies, toddlers, seniors, everyone in between."

Often, people on the autism spectrum visit, as well as individuals with ADHD, anxiety, trauma, PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, and epilepsy. "We also have had quite a few people recovering from concussions and need a dark place to get away from the lights," Brady adds, noting that the entire family or all fairgoing partners are welcome in the space as well.

This year, Fraser has added some new tools, like a new version of last year's popular giant pin art, more interior sound dampening components (for better or worse, the building is on the parade route), and tools like earplugs and sensory kits people can take with them to help them manage the fair once they leave the Fraser space. (Want to buy a kit before the fair? They're available [online](#).)

"There was a family that came last year from Bemidji who came to the fair just because of this," says Fraser's chief of marketing and development officer Nancy Baldrice. "They'd always wanted to come, but they said, 'Now we feel like if we can't do it, we have a place to go.' It's made a big difference for people."

But the push for inclusion doesn't stop at the Sensory Building. Brady has been working with the State Fair to create a sensory-friendly morning at the Midway and Kidway (new this year on Monday, August 28, from 9 a.m.–11 a.m. at the Midway and 10 a.m.–noon at the Midway), during which fair staff will reduce lights, sounds, and most announcements to make these often-overwhelming spaces a little more accessible to people with sensory sensitivities. And this is just the beginning.

"There's so much we can do at the State Fair, but that's just 12 days out of the year," Brady says. "We want there to be opportunities like this all 365 days of the year."

Brady and the Fraser team, along with other nonprofits, have brought sensory-friendly spaces and days to arts organizations and live sporting events throughout the Twin Cities over the last few years. Theaters like the Orpheum offer sensory-friendly performances, and Target Field and U.S. Bank Stadium offer sensory rooms on select game days.

Stock, with Central Roofing, has seen inclusive space's impact firsthand. "Every time we do these things, it's always about busting down a door, opening a window, doing whatever it takes to make things easier for people like my children—that's the selfish side of me," he says. "But I also know that when I do that, I hold the door open for everybody else to run through too. My children don't necessarily have what looks like a disability you could physically see, but we like to have a good time as a family and I want to make sure every family has the same opportunity."

And if that opportunity includes a day at the fair, knowing they have a safe, understanding space to turn to, that's a pretty good start.

The Fraser Sensory Building is open 9 a.m.–9 p.m. every day during the Minnesota State Fair. Find it on the west side of Cosgrove St., south of the Home Improvement Building. Check out a virtual tour on Fraser's [Instagram](#), and find more info at [mnstatefair.org](#)

Madison is Associate Editor of Mpls.St.Paul Magazine. Read more by Madison Bloomquist

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