



04.02.18 | WORLD CHANGING IDEAS

## A New “Yelp For Sensory Needs” Helps People With Autism Find Inclusive Spaces

People with autism and with illnesses like PTSD, which heighten sensitivity to loud noises and crowds, often struggle to find calm and support in large venues. A new app helps families find them.



[Photo: KultureCity]



**BY EILLIE ANZILOTTI**

Conditions like autism and conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder make people especially sensitive to loud noises and cramped, overstimulating environments. It's common practice among parents of kids with [autism](#) or other sensory needs to just avoid noisy or crowded venues altogether. But Julian Maha, CEO of [KultureCity](#), a Birmingham, Alabama-based nonprofit dedicated to building inclusion for people with autism, is working to change that.

Last year, Maha and KultureCity worked with Quicken Loans Arena—home to the Cleveland Cavaliers and often called The Q—to create a program that would allow people with sensory needs to still attend and enjoy games.



[Photo: KultureCity]

The Q facilities staff built out a designated “sensory room,” decorated with calming colors and noise-muffling walls, on the suite level, where people can go for a respite from the noise. Staff also hand out complimentary sensory bags, filled with noise-muffling headphones, fidget toys, and cushions to anyone in need. To ensure the arena staff are equipped to respond to and help should a situation arise, they went through a comprehensive training with KultureCity to learn about sensory needs, autism, PTSD, and myriad other issues, and how to manage them.

The program, according to a Cavs spokesperson, has been a success: The Q has seen regular usage of the amenities since they became available last year, and more families with sensory needs are attending games. More NBA teams have gotten on board the program and gone through training with KultureCity as well. Around 19 NBA arenas, as well as a handful of NFL and MLB stadiums, and public amenities like [zoos and aquariums](#), have rolled out sensory-inclusive programming, and Maha hopes to get even more facilities to join.

[Photo: KultureCity]

But for Maha, creating these spaces and programs is only half the battle. How will families know where to find them, and how can KultureCity easily notify families as the list of inclusive spaces grows?

To answer those questions, Maha and KultureCity are launching [an app](#) on World Autism Day: April 2. “We couldn’t have launched it last year—we didn’t have enough spaces,” Maha says. Now, though, KultureCity’s programming has extended to 18 states.

The app will function as a community for families of people with sensory needs, and as a guide to sensory-inclusive spaces across the U.S. KultureCity will provide photos, videos, and information on the kind of amenities and services available. People with the app will be able to rate and comment on places, and they'll be able to use an in-app messaging service to seek out tips for people who have visited places in the past, and just to talk about the shared experience of navigating sensory needs. "It's like Yelp for sensory inclusion," Maha says. "Families will be able to know that they can travel to these places and their children or loved ones will be accepted."

[Image: KultureCity]

The app will cost \$0.99 to download. It's low cost enough to be accessible to all families, Maha says, but the charge, he hopes, will create enough extra steps to deter people from downloading the app just to troll. That is, after all, why Maha decided against hosting the community feature of the KultureCity app on Facebook. "There's so much [negativity on the platform](#), and that can be devastating to people in this community," he says. Keeping everything on the app will allow KultureCity more monitoring power over potentially harmful comments.

And Maha hopes that the app will also empower the community of people using it. "If you visit or live in a place that does not have sensory-inclusive spaces, you can reach out through the app and we will provide you with the tools and information to help bring sensory inclusion to your town," Maha says.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellie Anzilotti is an assistant editor for Fast Company's Ideas section, covering sustainability, social good, and alternative economies. Previously, she wrote for CityLab. [More](#)

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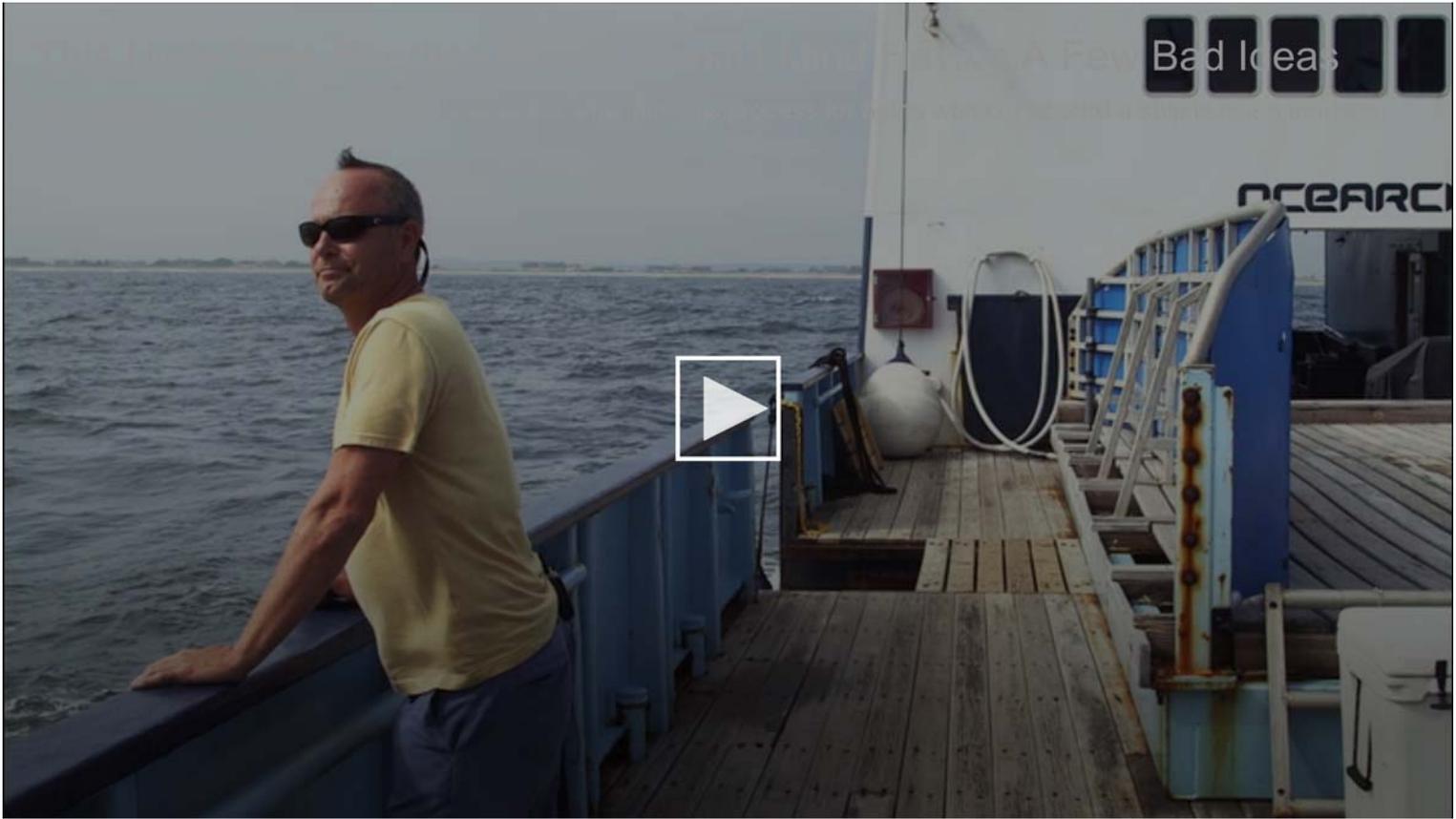
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