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Sensory sanctuary: WKU to offer game day calming room for children with autism

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 35 min ago

As the mother of a child with autism, Amy Hardin has learned there are some community events that her family can't fully enjoy.

That's why Hardin is working with Western Kentucky University's Alumni Association on Saturday to offer a sensory calming room during the football game against Marshall.

She hopes to help make WKU's Parent and Family Weekend something every family can enjoy.

"This is going to be a welcome space for anyone who has sensory needs," said Hardin, a member of the alumni association's board of directors.

Starting at 4 p.m. during tailgating and through halftime, a bus will offer games and a relaxing environment for families that need it. It will be next to the Alumni Association Tailgate and Celebrate tent on the South Lawn.

The bus will be on loan from Hilltopper IMG Sports Marketing and will be equipped with items from the Suzanne Vitale Clinical Education Complex. A volunteer will be on hand to help families or individuals who need to use the room.

Going forward, the alumni association would like to regularly offer the room at sporting events, according to Ginny Hensley, director of alumni programming at WKU.

The puzzle piece symbol – which represents the complexity and diversity of people with autism spectrum disorder – will be displayed on event invitations when sensory rooms are available.

Hensley said the idea to add a sensory calming room grew out of the board’s broader effort to engage with more diverse alumni groups. Along with people with neurological differences, the board is also reaching out to African-American and international alumni, Hensley said.

Hensley said the project likely wouldn’t have happened without Hardin’s support.



“Some really great things have developed because of her,” Hensley said.

Hardin, a season ticket holder, said she attended and enjoyed football games with her son, J.W. Hardin, for several years.

That changed during a game when a fireworks display badly frightened her son. “It scared him to death,” she said.

For some time after that, she struggled to help her son enjoy the games again, she said. Hardin hopes the room will be a sanctuary for families who’ve shared that experience.

“We want to offer this space as a way to give them peace of mind,” she said.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @BGDN_edbeat or visit bgdailynews.com.

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