SPEAKER:  
You are listening to the AOTA podcast. Here is your host, Matt Brandenburg.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Alright. Today I am joined by Frank Gainer, the vice president of Meetings and Events at the American Occupational Therapy Association, to discuss plans for the AOTA Inspire 2024 annual conference going to be held in Orlando, Florida. Frank, you are one of the most well-known professionals in our field. You do so much work behind the scenes that maybe people aren't always aware of. But I wanna thank you so much for being on the show today.

FRANK GAINER:  
Thank you, Matt. I'm looking forward to our discussion. And by well-known, I sign a lot of certificates and send out a lot of emails on behalf of the conference team. I think that's how my name is well known.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
There you go. People might recognize your signature more than your voice.

FRANK GAINER:  
Yes.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Well, could you introduce us a little bit more to your role as the VP of Meetings and Events? You mentioned that you coordinate a lot through emails and your own certificates. Can you give us some more info? What do you do as the VP?

FRANK GAINER:  
Well, there's four of us on our conference team and then, of course, we have two individuals who sell the Expo sponsorship and then we have marketing and creative services support. But the four of us on the team, I focus primarily on the program and also accessibility and (INAUDIBLE) the OT voices and eyes to the process. We have a director who handles all the logistics of it, and then we have two conference coordinators who split up their time between registration, the call for papers, on-site support, those types of things. They're the ones who are mainly communicating with the folks who have any type of questions. As far as about speakers, the attendee experience, things of that sort. And then we have an outside company who helps us with our site selection and also they help us on site with logistics too.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Wonderful. So there's a lot of people involved, a lot of partnerships involved, obviously a lot of moving parts. Can you describe what really goes into planning and prepping for conferences each year?

FRANK GAINER:  
Well, prior to COVID, and that's how I break my life up now, pre-COVID, after COVID. Prior to COVID, we would try and plan five years out. 20 years ago, we were doing two to three years out and we weren't getting the cities that we wanted or the dates that we wanted. And as we've grown over the years, we find that five years out is our sweet spot, and then we can assure we get the dates we want. And also we're first choice with the cities we want. So we began planning for Orlando back in 2018. And selecting the city, making sure we have all the space we need, the hotels, things of that sort and things. Then things really start to pick up about a year out and now we're hitting that spot, or we're getting the program. Hopefully Wednesday we're gonna have the program selected and then we'll get ready for the second call in the fall. And we're starting to look at, OK, what type of meeting space do we need? Folks are starting to let us know, hey, when we're on site in Orlando, we wanna room for this many to have, and we're gonna meet about this topic on this day.

And we're already starting to get queries about the alumni receptions, which happened Thursday, Friday, or Saturday night in the space that we have contracted out with the hotels. So, you know, our goal is to have registration and hotel rooms open by October 25th, and we hope to have more information on our conference microsite by early September. And I can just say last week we signed our keynote speaker. We aren't ready to announce who that is, but I'm very excited about them and think he's got a topic that will resonate with the practitioners.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Don't tease us like that, Frank. We wanna know who it is.

FRANK GAINER:  
I'm, y'all be very happy, I can assure you.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
And that's wonderful. And it's exciting to hear that things are beginning to come together and feel even more real for this year. I saw on Twitter just this past week, maybe two weeks ago, that you're already, you know, visiting sites and making decisions about 2027. So it's interesting how, you know, inspire each year you're at different stages planning out those five years ahead. There's there's a lot going on. Related specifically to the conference this year in Orlando, there's been a lot of questions related to safety and inclusivity at the event this year. Could you kind of give us a background about some of the concerns you've heard about from potential attendees?

FRANK GAINER:  
Yes. We've been hearing, you know, we develop the FAQs in mid-May, and since then I've heard, you know, we put down on there the conference at AOTA.org email address to send us any specific concerns you may have. And I'm the one who answers those queries. And since mid-May, we've gotten about 25 individual messages, and about half of them are saying, why are you going to Orlando? Do you not know what Florida is doing? And of course, we know what Florida is doing, but Florida wasn't doing that in 2018. And, you know, the biggest issue we have that people are sharing is about safety. And we're being very intentional and thorough in how we approach all the issues that people have brought up to us. Right now, we had six shuttle companies reach out to us with a bid, and we're looking at what we think are the most important criteria for a shuttle company to operate safely in Orlando. And we're very close to finalizing that shuttle company. And we're also getting a number of bids on security.

The convention center has their own security staff, but we need to supplement it as a lessee. And so we're getting a number of bids from security companies. We wanna see what types of groups they provided security for. And we also want to see what type of training they've had. And we're having conversations about what our attendees' expectations are, what their concerns are. And there've been very open and honest conversations and everyone wants a piece of our business and now we're just gonna be very intentional and go through what they're asking. We're doing interviews and we hope to have our security lined up by mid-September at the latest, our security company. And then another story, another issue I hear is about bathroom access. Florida legislature and Governor, DeSantis, signed off on it, saying that any type of public restroom that's owned, run by the county or state, you have to use the restroom of your assigned gender at birth. That caused us some concerns. We reached out to Orange County Convention Center and they told us, as an a lessee in our area of the convention center, we can set up the bathrooms however we wish and AOTA will continue doing its policy of you can use whatever bathroom you identify with as your gender or gender identification.

And that's been cleared by the Orange County Convention Center.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
That's wonderful news. I know that was a major concern for a lot of people making plans for the conference. And obviously, that's a main concern and something that will need to be checked out. So that's very reassuring to hear. It sounds like safety and bathroom access have been two of those main concerns you've heard about. Thanks for describing some of what AOTA has done so far to address these concerns. Are there additional plans to help make the event safe and inclusive?

FRANK GAINER:  
Well, we're going back to Orlando in the second week of September, and this is what we call our final walkthrough so we can begin to look one more time at the space and make sure everything's as we remember it and we think it will still fit. Because last time we were there was 2018, and so we just got to make sure everything's the way it still is. If there was any remodeling done, enhancements, we wanna make sure we understand those. And plus our call for papers did very well that we had in the spring. We're almost up to our pre-COVID records. And I think with our fall call we will be at our pre-COVID numbers. And so we've been working to find additional space at The Rosen Center, which is our headquarters hotel, so we can have sessions in those rooms so we can give more people the opportunity to present by increasing our capacity. And right now we can have 22 sessions going on at any one time. So that's something too we wanna check when we get back. Is are these rooms the size we think they are?

And can it accommodate additional sessions? 'Cause as you know, we're a very broad field and we wanna make sure anyone who comes can find sessions relevant to their practice or their interest area.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Absolutely. I love that about inspired so many aspects within OT and within the scope of OT are really presented and valuable connections can really be made there. You mentioned there was a lot of feedback and concern with people, you know, asking why Orlando and why not move it. I think what you've shared already speaks to how these plans have been in motion for so long. And can you speak to us more about how AOTA made the decision not to move or cancel the conference from occurring in Orlando?

FRANK GAINER:  
There are a number of different reasons. You know, we did look at other sites, but there is so much pent-up demand since COVID. The worst of it's behind us that it's very hard to find other openings. We did reach out to a number of different cities for next year, and the only cities that had openings, they had it over Easter or Passover and AOTA has a policy that you can't have a conference within a week of a major religious holiday. So we looked at a number of different cities in different parts of the country and there was no availability. There's also discussion is, do we abandon our colleagues in Florida, or do we stay in support them. And we've heard from people that say, well, just don't go, don't go, do a fully virtual conference. We've gotten feedback that people are over virtual conferences, live webinars are fine, but no one wants to spend three days online attending a conference. And because we have to commit to these cities so far out, because a place like Orlando is one of the top two or three largest convention centers in the country, there's a lot of interest there.

And so we sign agreements with these cities so they block those dates for us. We lock in the hotel rooms and if we cancel, there are penalties. And for us to move out of Orlando right now would be $2.2 million in penalties. And that's not insured because that's something we're choosing to do. And and no city will agree to letting us leave if there are some changes in the politics of the location. And so it's a risk we take. And one of the things too that I'm, that Orlando is different. Our headquarters hotel is not a major chain. It's a property owned by someone local to Orlando. He's very familiar with OT because his youngest son had a brain tumor and died from it. And so during the course of his treatment, he did receive OT services. And after his son passed, he made a donation of over 20 million to Shands University at the University of Florida and Shands Hospital at the University of Florida in Gainesville for neuro research. So he's a gentleman that is revered in Orlando, and his employees respect him.

He makes sure they all get health care. They have access to good health care, even as his own clinic for his employees. So this is I feel good about us supporting him because he supports his staff. If we were to pull out, there's no telling that Orlando could fill that hole. And because most of the people in the service industry are hourly workers, they would not work during that time and would not be paid. So we are also supporting the local workers.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Yeah, absolutely. There's so many moving parts that it kind of are done behind the scenes and don't really come to light to, you know, attendees at Inspire and the everyday practitioner who has so many aspects of their own life that deserve their attention and their focus. I wanna ask a little bit about your own process. It's fascinating to me to get a kind of sneak peek on how, you know, these partnerships are made and all the planning and collaboration that goes into bringing Inspire together and to fruition. What are some other things that you look for in a host city when making these plans?

FRANK GAINER:  
If I just back up one minute, Matt, because of our size, there are only 32 sites we can go to in the US. And when I say sites, I mean sites, not cities. It's even less cities because like Las Vegas has two convention centers that could accommodate us. We've outgrown a number of cities over the years. Long Beach, Charlotte, Baltimore. They can no longer accommodate a show of our size. So first thing we're always looking at, are you big enough for us? Are you accessible by air? What's it like to get from the hotels to the convention center? Is it a safe area? Do you have accessibility for people who have any type of physical disability? Or, and, you know, a number of convention centers are looking at how they can better assist and meet the needs of people on the spectrum. So then we wanna look at, we got to make sure the dates April and October are the busiest convention months in the country. That's when, you know, the majority of groups want to meet, spring and fall. So we got to make sure we aren't conflicting with Easter, Passover, Ramadan, and other major holidays of that sort.

We also wanna make sure that it's affordable for our attendees and for AOTA. There are certain cities that are just cost-prohibitive because close to 50% of our attendees pay their own costs. Another percentage get, maybe their registration paid for while they pay all travel-related costs. And about 30 to 35% have their cost covered by their employers. So cost is important to us. We also want to make sure we're going to different parts of the country 'cause we know there's a group of folks who will come to us when we are relatively close to where they live and work. About 25% come every year, no matter where we are. So that's another area that we look at and we want the area to be appealing for folks that, hey, that may be an area I've never been to or haven't been there in a while or it's a good area to bring my family to. I'll share this with you, Matt. The last time we were in Orlando was 2010. We had 6,000 attendees at that year. Our 6,000 attendees bought more tickets to the theme parks than a conference across the street that had 22,000 attendees that were there for what they call coverings, which is the tile, carpet folks like that.

That was pretty surprising to me. And when we did a survey, we found that so many people brought their kids, their parents to watch the kids and bring them to the theme parks. I mean, we had 40 to 50% who had brought family members so they could extend their stay and enjoy the attractions in Orlando.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Wow! So you're telling me that occupational therapy practitioners and attendees at Inspire last time in Orlando really valued their leisure occupations and planning around that?

FRANK GAINER:  
They certainly did. And if we could, we have the proof in the number of ticket sales. And we are working with Disney and Universal on getting discounted tickets again.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
And that is excellent news. Definitely adds value to visiting that area and kind of exploring some of the community around each city that Inspire's held at. Are there other ways that AOTA plans to support maybe more social justice initiatives in the local Orlando community and in Florida during Inspire and after?

FRANK GAINER:  
We have, every year when we go to a new city, we ask the state president of that association to identify a chair for the local conference committee. And in my role, I serve as liaison to that chair. And then that chair identifies five individuals from that area who are part of his or her committee. And one of the things they do every year is they choose a charity that our attendees can contribute to. We also offer them a space in our expo if they wanna do more fundraising there. This year, because of everything going on in Florida, our local conference committee has chosen three charities that our members can contribute to and we'll be announcing those next month. And they are all related to the issues that are occurring in Florida that's getting a lot of press.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
That's wonderful that AOTA is able to support more initiatives and charities and programs within the community that are actively working to address some of these concerns and issues that members of our own profession are having as well. So I know I'm excited to hear what those charities may be. Again, you're teasing us a lot. I wish you could give us more.

FRANK GAINER:  
Yeah, I think I'm very proud of the work they've done. I've had not personally met this committee yet, but I understand they are one of the most diverse local conference committees in AOTA's history. Not only from gender, from practitioner type, from sexual orientation, people of color. Yeah, I'm looking forward to working with them over the next eight, nine months.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
And that's what's wonderful. And as we mentioned previously in Florida, as well as in some other states within the United States and federally, there are new laws that many OT practitioners feel are out of alignment with our profession's values that deal with some of those issues like gender and race. How would you say that these laws affect the program at Inspire? And are there any topics that will be restricted as a result?

FRANK GAINER:  
You know, that was a concern we heard early on in the process, and there is actually no change to our programming. None whatsoever. Zero, nothing. We are continuing to cover the topics we've always covered. I can tell you this, that out of the, all of the submissions that came in during the spring call that have now gone out for review and we're getting ready to schedule on Wednesday, we're getting input from all the different SISs and close to 10% are DEI related topics. We're going to continue to cover transgender health care DEI-related topics, everything. And the one thing, again, I'm giving you a teaser, but we just aren't there yet to announce it. Our two panels, general panels that we are going to be offering on Thursday and Friday afternoon will be addressing some of these areas of concern. And we're actually going to have a film premiere on Thursday evening that will also be addressing an area of concern.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
And that's wonderful that these areas are going to be addressed. And instead of, you know, beating around the bush or giving a general type of answer or response, it sounds like AOTA and Inspire is planning on addressing these issues head-on. What kind of steps do you take to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion when you're going through the planning process for Inspire?

FRANK GAINER:  
We had close to, I wanna say, over 200 volunteer reviewers, and they go through all the submissions that have been, that came in in the spring call. And I like having at least four sets of eyes look at every submission because then we find the process is fairer and it also addresses those outliers that may occur. When we ask people not to let their biases enter, fear in their review, but if someone feels that their submission did not get a fair review, they can always reach out to conference at AOTA.org, and we will take a look at it. And, you know, assess it. Our review is a blind review process and DEI became one of our primary topic categories. I'm not sure how long ago. And so we look at the, you know, the practice areas and we divvy the submissions up according to historical numbers about, you know, in the past how many folks have come to those sessions. Like for children and youth, we may dedicate four of the 22 rooms to children and youth topics. We may dedicate three of those rooms to adult rehab.

We're dedicating two of the rooms to DEI topics. You've got a tech lab. We do a student-only room for a variety of topics that we think students, based upon input from the ASD steering committee may be interested in attending. Any, students can go to any session, but we do try and provide some student-specific topics. Then we have a couple of rooms for mental health practitioners. And, you know, so this is a conference that attendees or potential attendees submit their papers for. It goes through a review process from volunteers. The SISs, special interest sections, rank order, the high-scoring submissions, and what they would recommend being scheduled. So this is an attendee-driven conference. And their work, and we used to do about 80 invited presentations. Now we are down to five. 'Cause we want the attendees to create their own content and to share their work.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Wow! That's a testament as well to the growth within the field of occupational therapy. And you know, it manifests at Inspire where more attendees and more practitioners are generating research, generating evidence, making connections, and establishing communities to support our profession as a whole. I really love that example and hearing some of the numbers behind it. Frank, you already mentioned the additional steps and measures that are being taken with securing a shuttle service and additional security to help attendees and feel that their safety is ensured. Are there any additional measures being taken to focus on safety and inclusivity for all attendees?

FRANK GAINER:  
One thing we will be doing too is that you cannot enter the convention center, at least get past registration unless you have an ID badge, an AOTA badge or a, unless you work at the convention center and you're wearing your badge or an exhibitor badge. Our show is not open to the public. It's a closed show, and we will have security that's going to be checking to make sure everyone is registered. And we will also have roving security. And our local conference committee is there to help folks navigate the convention center. We rely on about 400 volunteers to assist us in helping people move safely from space to space. And so we're always thinking about safety. Even prior to going to Orlando, when we had to deal with COVID in San Antonio, safety is a concern of ours. That we want, you know, some people aren't used to being in a group of 7,000 people, 8,000 people, prior to COVID, nine, 10,000 people. And, you know, it's a small city moving around. And we wana have enough folks there to assist folks.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Absolutely and that's encouraging to hear. I know just like you mentioned, the fact of being around that many people can be really overwhelming to many people and attendees at the conference. So it's reassuring to hear the steps that are being taken. I have to be honest, when I was preparing for this interview and I kind of looked into some of the feedback and what people were saying on social media and statements from COTAD, hearing about the concerns that, you know, transgender expansive, queer and people of diverse races have and are expressing was really impactful to me. Inspire is such a motivating, encouraging and educational experience I want everyone to partake that good that happens at Inspire. And if people don't feel safe, it's a huge issue and they can't really take in all the positives that Inspire has to offer. And as you mentioned, you know, at the same time, there's thousands of practitioners, educators, and researchers who live in Florida who AOTA represents and may not be sure what to do now that their state government has enacted new laws over this planning of conference.

So, Frank, how do you recommend practitioners voice their support for activists and advocates in Florida while also supporting Inspire 2024 and our professional organization?

FRANK GAINER:  
You know, we're going to the local conference committee is very well connected to the community and we'll have more discussions with them about what we can do more locally beyond our charities that they've selected. And you know, Matt, when the fall call for papers opens, which will be mid-October, one of the categories that we accept then, are the conversations that matter. Which had proved very, very popular. I hope people will submit topics related to this so we can have those discussions. To give you an example of what happened. We always save some space. When we were in Kansas City, Missouri was experiencing some issues with their legislature related to DEI. The academic programs in Missouri reached out to AOTA and said, could you give us a meeting space so we can gather and discuss this? And we did and we advertised it through our app. I mean, we were, are willing to work with any group that wants to get together at conference. You know, we will find you a space to meet and gather and meet with like-minded individuals.

That's the beauty of annual conference Inspire.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
I love that. I love that. It's really wonderful to hear your responsiveness to member concerns and attendee concerns and Inspire really is just such an educational and edifying experience as long as those spaces are provided and these conversations can continue to happen. I know and I'm looking forward to Inspire. 24. Frank, what are some additional thoughts you have? What are you looking forward to the most about Inspire 2024?

FRANK GAINER:  
Well, I think not everyone realizes this, but Inspire Annual Conference is the largest gathering of occupational therapy practitioners in the world every year. And I look forward to seeing that energy, their excitement. They're being re-energized about what they're doing, the career choice they made, validating their career choice and just being around that energy I feed off of. And it gives me a great deal of satisfaction to hear people talk, oh, I just went to the best session or this just happened or that keynote speaker really got me to think differently. And you know, when they go to our special events, the panels, last year we had a panel on women's health. They didn't get to anywhere near all the questions that were being sent in. And that's what I like to hear. And I like people to come and just learn new things, learn to be a better practitioner, to look at things, doing things different, and also to become engaged. Look at the world, what's going on around you, and how you can contribute to improving it.

And man, I do wanna say, you know, I'm a gay man. Sometimes it's hurtful to think that people actually think AOTA would put folks in harm's way. No, that's not true. Safety is always at our front. You know, we also have some special events planned for Inspire. The National Black OT Caucus is going to celebrate their 50th anniversary in Orlando. And come to find out, I was at the same conference where they were founded in 1974, in Washington, DC, as a first-year OTA student. And the other big thing that's going to happen is that Howard University is going to celebrate its 50th anniversary as the first accredited OT program that was, that is housed at an HBCU. So those are things I'm really looking forward to celebrating.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
That's a, thank you for sharing all of that. You bring such a wonderful perspective to Inspire and, and to conference, you know, there's so much to celebrate about the occupational therapy profession. It's really a profession that strives to make things better for people from, for all people. It's an inclusive profession and one that continues to grow and continues to support learning and education and increase access to resources. So thank you so much for that, Frank. It's been a wonderful conversation. Is there anything else you'd like to say to me or the listeners to help us prepare for Inspire and really get the most out of our experience there?

FRANK GAINER:  
Well, I'm gonna give you another teaser, Matt, and I hope by the end of the year that AOTA can announce where we're going to be in 2027, 2028, and 2029. 'Cause we're going to be getting caught up now after COVID and make sure that we have the dates and the locations we wanna (INAUDIBLE).

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
That is exciting news, we'll definitely follow that. Will that be announced on AOTA.org, social media?

FRANK GAINER:  
(INAUDIBLE) all of our social media channels and as we finalize each year, we may put that out, but people are going to be excited. And, you know, cities all across the country, whenever an AOTA conference has been we've made the sites that we use more accessible. I've been told by convention centers and hotels that our accessibility requirements are stricter than the Paralyzed Veterans of America. And we tell people we work with people with disabilities and so we have to, you know, make sure that we are up to speed in all of those areas. So I can tell you, you give me a city, I'll tell you what we've done differently there to help that city, those facilities be more accessible.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
I love that. I love that. What a wonderful representation of occupational therapy and leaving a city and a convention center a little bit more accessible than when it was founded. That's a great illustration of how our profession can continue to make a positive impact.

FRANK GAINER:  
And I'd like to just close, Matt, that if anyone has any concerns, they can feel free to reach out to me at fgainer, that's F-G-A-I-N-E-R at ATA.Org.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
And wonderful. Thank you, Frank. I'll be sure to include that email in our episode description as well as a link to the AOTA Inspire FAQ page. Are there any other resources you'd like accessible to our listeners?

FRANK GAINER:  
Not at this point. Be looking for more over the next four to five weeks.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Wonderful. We will definitely keep an eye out. Frank, thank you so much for taking the time to be on the show today. It's been wonderful talking to you and getting all these sneak peeks and teasers about Inspire.

FRANK GAINER:  
Thank you, Matt. I appreciate the opportunity.

MATT BRANDENBURG:  
Absolutely. We'll have to do it again soon.

SPEAKER:  
Thanks for listening to the AOTA podcast. Tune in again next time.