

Explorable | Season One, Episode Four: Transcript of interview with Craig Kennedy

JOSH: So today's guest, everybody, is Craig Kennedy. He's program coordinator and lead trainer of the Open Doors Organization. Craig has more than 20 years of experience working with people with disabilities, disability travel- and-tourism, and most importantly and significantly for everybody listening, his disability rights advocacy and legislation are super significant. Craig, welcome to the show we are super thrilled you are here. We'd love to hear a little bit more about your background before we dive into the questions.

CRAIG: Sounds good, man, and I'm excited to be here. Thank you guys for having me, for sure. I love doing this kind of stuff. For those of you guys that don't know me, which is most of you, I am a wheelchair user. You can't see that from the pictures here. But I broke my back skiing. I live in Steamboat Springs Colorado, which is a just a beautiful place. I'm in northwest Colorado. It's a worldwide destination for skiing.

But I broke my back skiing twenty five years ago. That's why I'm in a chair. I remember being in the hospital and the impetus that got me to move back to Steamboat afterwards was when my mom came into my room after being there for a few weeks and said, "Craig I got this great idea. I think you should move home and I'll take care of you." And that was the moment that I decided I'm moving back to Steamboat. And the people here took care of me. They had fundraisers for me. It's just an amazing place to be.

So, you know, I spent the next few years just kind of adjusting, and getting back into life, and getting over what I called my "angry years." Adjusting to life in a wheelchair was a huge change for a guy that was really active. I was in my early 20s, so it was a huge change for me. Eventually after a couple years, I got back to work at the Sheraton here in town, answering phones... just basic things. I love customer service so much, I eventually went up to the concierge desk and started running that for a couple of years.

Then I ran a high end spot here, really just staying in the tourism industry. I grew up in an upstate New York little town called Lake George New York, and I had this opportunity while I was running the spa... I had met my now wife--girlfriend at the time --Andy, and we had this dream to travel around Colorado and write a book about access. A travel access book. We had been to Alaska together and it really opened our eyes because even though people said it would be accessible... it wasn't necessarily.

So we decided to write an accurate adventure travel guide for people with disabilities. And we started our company called Access Anything. So we published a couple of travel guides. Access

Anything Colorado: Adventuring with disabilities. Not still in print, but... if you want to copy I can get you one. Everything's digital these days.

After we closed those doors I actually went to work for a local adaptive sports program called Stars Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports, amazing chapter in my life eight years of getting to get out on the ground floor of starting running and growing in Adaptive Sports Program here in Steamboat Springs Colorado. As the program director, I taught kids and adults how to ski around 20 programs for injured veterans every year. The really amazing fulfilling part of my life eventually got burned out on that working in the nonprofit world... it was a little tough when you're living in a resort town but I still love it.

TOBY: Our mission here is to make travel easier. We want travel to be easier for everybody else. So that's why I work in the field and I get paid to travel. It's kind of nice. Really appreciate you sharing all that caring and wonderful fearless listeners to hear that story. I'm curious actually where's the last place you traveled pre COVID and where do you go?

CRAIG: Good question, good question. You know I love traveling and I couldn't wait to get back on the road. But before everything shut down, we were actually in Madrid speaking at an international airline training conference. So I flew home from Madrid. I think it was March 6th... and they shut Europe down about a week later, so I just snuck out of there in time. We had spent the last six months all over Europe from Amsterdam to Berlin.

I'll be honest with you. So you know, that was my first trip back on the road and I've been travelling almost every week since... actually I've been to New Haven Connecticut a couple times and go there again on Sunday. I've been to Boston I've been to Portland Oregon where it was very, very smoky. I was there for a week, then headed to Philly for a couple of weeks. I've been to Albany, New York a couple of times-- all of this is all Amtrak stuff.

JOSH: So Craig, Amtrak has been in the news, lots of positive things going on with the U.S. rail system... but there are some potential bumps in the road. I wonder if you could maybe touch on some of the ways that Amtrak is trying to improve--not only their image--but how the Open Doors Organization is really helping to train the Amtrak teams, from a best practices standpoint for disability inclusion.

CRAIG: So you know, that's a great question thank you. That's exactly what we're in the middle of doing right now, which is why around 10000 employees--from directors and upper management, all the way down-- are attending training. Really the purpose here is simple: make people comfortable around people with disabilities.

Now I read a study in the UK from a few years ago and people that they surveyed like 60 some percent of them were uncomfortable interacting with a person with a disability which is kind of shocking to me you know.

So, I think a big part of what we're doing is making sure that when a guy like me rolls into a room full of 100 people in a wheelchair, that they actually see me... and they're saying in their minds "oh gosh you know he's in a wheelchair too but that doesn't really matter but they saw the person first."

That's not usually how it is. But we want people to be more comfortable, so we're giving them the tools, you know. The adequate training, sensitivity training on "how do you talk."

I always ask my class, "How do you treat a person with a disability?" They always get it right. You treat people with disabilities like everybody else. It's not rocket science. Treat people like people. See people as people. And that would go a long way.

Really that's what we're trying to do. Just make sure people are comfortable and have the confidence to deal with situations when they come up, you know. So that's really what we're doing.

JOSH: Craig, I'd like to talk a little bit about your work and the Open Doors Organization. Can you share with our listeners what the mission is of the Open Doors Organization?

CRAIG: Yeah. Very simply to make goods and services more accessible for people with disabilities and travel and tourism. That's what we do. We work with any kind of disability transportation organization, or anyone in the tourism hospitality industry. Like I said, the bulk of what we do is in airports and airlines, training disability experts under the ACA. And if you guys are familiar with the Air Carrier Access Act, it is the law that covers you when you're actually on the airplane in the sky.

We've done sensitivity and customer service training for the cruise ship industry, for many different airlines, for the trains, taxi services-- we even do disability training for Uber and Lyft. I mean we're tied into everything to do with disability travel and tourism. Basically, my big thing is, I'm one of the lead trainers, so I get to train the trainers... and actually go to these different towns and train people. I can train scenarios which are "complaint resolutions" for the airlines.

Disability experts for the airports right. So they're there. Whoever handles their disability complaints and their disability manager basically at the airport is just really any kind of disability training to be honest with you I love it. I get to basically get paid to travel. That's what I tell people. It's a good gig.

TOBY: So I'm wondering, to that end... Craig what do you need? What does Open Doors Organization need from hoteliers and vacation rental property owners activity operators destination marketing organizations every everyone on that side of the house. What do you need from them to further the open doors organization's mission.

CRAIG: Oh good question. Cooperation openness to change you know some of the big things that I think one of the big misconceptions is that being more accessible costs a lot of money and it typically isn't that situation.

But when you say those three letters "ACA" people don't think of the American Dental Association-- they think of the America's Disability Act. And they're immediately up in arms, like well you know "I'm grandfathered in," and there's a lot of excuses. It's really just a fear. You know, I used to do a seminar called "Taking the Fear out of the ACA" so that people were just more comfortable. That's just three little letters that say somebody's disability has rights.

And if you want them to spend money at your place.. it might be a good idea to be accessible for the listeners that we have to travel with disabilities.

TOBY: How can we, as a community, can further that mission?

CRAIG: Oh great question. I think a big part of it is just getting out and traveling. I think a couple of things. Number one if you're a traveler with a disability and you don't travel that often... be prepared to travel.

You know, I hate to even put anything back on people's disabilities but I think in my experience a lot of times we as travelers are not fully prepared to travel or don't know quite what we need and have not yet adapted to it. So you know being more prepared on your end is a good thing. I would love it if people with disabilities would call the airline or Amtrak or whoever it is and say, "hey I have a disability. This is what I need." Now we can't require it because nobody else has to call in advance and tell them they're coming. That's not an equal right under the ACA. But when I travel I give as much information as I can because it makes my life easier and it makes everybody's life easier.

So I think sharing information is really important. I also think that the attitude we bring is important. I went through a phase early on in my disability. I told you I had my angry years and I noticed this with all people but especially sometimes with people with disabilities there's a sense of entitlement.

And I used to go around expecting people to get out of my way in a grocery store just because I was in a wheelchair right and some guy called me out on it one day and he said, "Hey man, why are

you so important? You know, why should I get out of your way.” And from that moment on I stopped that attitude of hey I'm disabled. I expect this. It's really you get more with sugar. If we truly want equality that we'll act like everybody else as well. That makes sense.

I know that sounds kind of harsh, but I really think you should be more prepared and have a better attitude while they're traveling and realize that, hey, if you're nice to people people will do stuff for you. I am so nice to the lady's at the desk... You know how often I get bumped up to first class? fairly often, especially now the planes aren't necessarily full.

Three big things for me. Three things all people with disabilities need to execute: They get out there to be seen, be positive, represent well and prepare and you said you touched on a point that I really appreciate. And it's like sharing information. So talk about your travels to your community and that inherently raises awareness for the able bodied community and for these travel service providers to know to see that we are active we are out there traveling and we do have a good attitude about it and we have money to spend.

We have power in numbers. So we're over a billion people worldwide in the US alone. I'll talk about our study here at some point, and all that was going to come up today but you know we've done several market studies on people with disabilities and people travel in the US the 80 some million people with disabilities take a lot of travel spend a lot of money and more importantly we have well over 200 billion dollars in disposable income to spend i.e. the money you have after you pay your bills.

TOBY: Let's take a deeper dive. Craig you mentioned the study or studies that Open Door Organization develops, and you are one of the few organizations that really taps into insight and information for destination marketing and disabled travelers. Tell us a little bit more about those studies, and maybe an interesting tidbit of insider too.

CRAIG: There's a bunch of myths out there about people with disabilities and some of the basics ones are that people with disabilities make up a small part of the population. Right? Well, people actually believe this. The most recent CDC study 2018 over 85 million people. 27 percent of our population. So we know that's not true. People with disabilities don't get out much. That's another thing that people think oh he's in a wheelchair we practice and go anywhere. This really travels at an all time high.

Our most recent study saw twenty seven million travelers took 81 million trips and spent almost 60 billion dollars just on their own travel. And that is up-- that's almost doubled from 2015. So, disability travel has been an all time high. And you know because you can access anywhere in the world now in 24 hours people with disabilities and more people with more severe disabilities and

big huge you know power chairs they're getting out and traveling and that's what's really opening people's eyes.

The other BIG misconception is: people with disabilities are poor. Which is not true! I think the actual number is over two hundred and twenty billion in disposable income. So again we have a buying power in sheer numbers right. But how did we get here?

I think what happened with us is that we realized a long time ago and when I started my initial consulting business, I was going around my friends here locally and saying hey guys you know I just started this consulting business to help you be more accessible. It's the right thing to do. It's the law. And they're like, "ah no, I don't give a crap about that. Show me how I can make money and I'll listen to you." These are friends of mine! They were brutally honest with me. They sat me down and said, "Craig, if you want change... show me how I can make money?"

That's when I met Eric and experienced their first study... and said now I could come back to my friend and show them the numbers. OK here's the stats, here's what people are doing, here's what people are going for the first time and right now especially that people all over the world are realizing that people disabilities are a viable market. Nobody ever saw us before they saw us as a burden, not a viable market.

I would argue that people with disabilities are the largest untapped tourism market in the world today. No doubt about it. And not just in tourism, untapped resources everywhere. Because people dispose of a lot to offer these don't often get the benefit of doubt. So our most recent poll was just June to July 20. It was done through Harris poll and it really looked at the frequency patterns expenditures of what people with disabilities in the US are doing.

I'll just read a couple of the other stats in here... some of these that I saw really stood out to me: 70 percent of adults with disabilities travel a long distance. Right!?! So that's just not in the US maybe that's even international travel. Thirty eight percent of adults with disabilities took at least one flight, spending eleven billion dollars which is a two billion dollar increase in 2015. So we're out there spending money and hopefully people will start to see us as less of a burden, and more of a contributor to the economy.

TOBY: So for our international listeners and those of us who are privileged to work for global enterprises are these numbers U.S. based. And do you and do you have global figures?

CRAIG: I do not. So this is U.S. based only... however there are some global figures out there. If you look for them. Just not as consolidated numbers as the data we provide. I know the U.K. has done some studies like this. In fact I thought I wrote down one... Yeah. So one of the stats I did pull is

they say, that they estimate there's roughly 83 billion dollars in euros out there up for grabs from travelers with disabilities. So that's the potential for this market. If you think even our stats... the average person with disability travels once a year. Right? So all those billions of dollars would have everybody just traveled one more time and boom you've got how many more billions of dollars in the market.

That's the stuff that shocks me. That's staggering to me how much potential there is and how easy it would be to actually get there.

JOSH: One quick question I have, Craig, is the Open Doors Organization, of course, connects with everyone from Amtrak to major hoteliers, to attractions, and all of this training... can you share the level of businesses that you collaborate with? For example if it's an independent hotel or an independent attraction are those levels of businesses that you work with and how would those or potentially larger major national organizations that haven't connected with Open Doors...What are those steps to connect with you? For example I'm based in Knoxville Tennessee and there is an independent hotel that's here in Knoxville. Not a major multinational chain. Does Open Doors train those smaller businesses? Are there different levels that you typically work with?

CRAIG: Yeah. So we definitely usually work on a much larger scale. For instance I just led my first project for these guys-- We did a year and a half project with I Love New York which is the state tourism sorry to be a good steward Tourism Authority for New York State. Empire State Development and we surveyed 300 sites across the state, and collated all the data, and presented it to them. I just turned in my final spreadsheet a couple of days ago so that that is more and that's that small scale for us, to be honest... if we were looking at local small businesses, you know, what I would say one of the questions you sent me talked about you know people are just starting to think about access where you know where it started.

You know what are the considerations on that level? Do you go to your local disability organizations right? The first thing you should do is talk to an expert because we all know that it's way more expensive to fix it afterwards than it is to do it right the first time right. So talk to your local nonprofits here. I sit on the board of directors for the Center for independents which is part of the Independent Living Centers cross country. We deal with five counties if people need accessible that free accessibility advice we give it to advice we give it to them.

And that's true in almost every big and small town in America. There is some kind of disability organization that knows about access that will help you for free. And that's the place to start -- enough to go out and hire an independent person like me that charges one hundred and ten bucks an hour for consulting. You know you don't have to do that. You can get free advice on that level.

JOSH: Yeah, that definitely helps frame your organization and its connectivity and I really do appreciate the message that you just shared for those smaller businesses within their destination marketing or demos that are interested in somehow taking that first path of progress towards disability inclusive city.

CRAIG: And I know about you guys but in my book I consider things accessible and then I also have this category of doable which I'm pretty much doing because I don't want to be left out. I get full blown isn't formal...it's very messy. So you know I think there's a difference between accessible and doable. And I think for most people they're getting started with accessibility... they think about the basics, that don't cost much as you're parking accessible is your entrance accessible is your bathroom accessible and are your basic goods and services can you get around the store.

Start simple. And for most people with disabilities they're not going to complain -- unless they're out looking for problems. Most people with disabilities are going to be OK with those few things because at least then we can get in and go the bathroom and use your services if they need to use them.. That's my opinion. But I think if you start there that's a really good thing

The other big thing I recommend to people's make sure your website is accessible. Last year I heard a stat that there were something like 10-15 thousand active website lawsuits because of website accessibility, which again, shouldn't be considered a burden or an expense on your end. I wish I'd had the study up in front of me. There's just another part that says like 80 some percent of people with disabilities book stuff online and use online to get access to information than everything they need to know.

So if your website is not accessible to somebody like Toby when he is a screen reader... then he's not going to spend money or business right. And there are if you have a pretty basic website, which most small businesses do. There are free accessibility tools out there that you can run. Go search for it on Google, click on it and it'll test your site for free. And tell you whether it's accessible or not. Easy at relatively no cost..

TOBY: Given that you pointed out so many of us online, how has the accessibility conversation changed for you? How has the conversation evolved around accessibility and travel? What will post COVID conversations be like in the accessibility community?

CRAIG: It's funny you know, it's strange for me to think of and talk until the last few months about how social media is turning 30 years old and I realize that I've been in the chair for 25 years. I only broke my back just a few years after we even had rights. You know so it's funny for me to even think about that 30 years later we're still fighting for proper access. But the conversation has definitely changed.

You know, back in the day in the 80s and 90s, the airline industry was wealthy. They were making a ton of money and weren't really worried about getting fined for violations for disability or whatever it was because they had so much money it didn't matter. And then 9/11 hit and now COVID hit and now they really have to look at their bottom line all the time right.

So I can tell you from personal knowledge that the average hub for an airline in the US is not the whole airline but the average hub spends between a million and a million half dollars a year on fines and violations through the D.A. and other things. What a big number right? It's not ADT violations. The ADA Air Carrier Access Act. Yes. I'm sorry. Thank you. Forgive me accessibility in mileage. Airport.

So that's the average airline hub spends about a million and a half dollars a year you know. So the big thing that's changed is that they are worried about pinching pennies now. So they are worried about all those fines. And how do we get it? How do we knock those fines down? All right. So disability. You guys are probably aware of disabilities on the world stage these days you know between the Convention on the rights for people with disabilities COPD people know about that was in 2006 that got passed.

Since then 180 countries have ratified it and sixty have signed it. So at least they're aware and the world now knows that they want to be more accessible. I mean good for Open Doors. They're turning to the US who has great disability legislation and saying hey we've got this law now can you help us figure out what we actually need to do. Right? Which is why international travel is growing so much. And then you know IATA last year there seventy fifth General Assembly and it had this big resolution of people disabilities they actually said I want to read this to you.

Airlines were ahead of their time when 50 years ago we set out standards to ensure passengers with disabilities have access to air travel. But now we need to go further. The numbers of persons with disabilities traveling by air are set to increase significantly as populations expand and grow older. We applaud the UN Convention on the rights of people disabilities with today's resolution. The industry is committed to ensure that passengers living with disabilities can travel safely and with dignity. This is the International Air Transportation Association. They've got a lot of power and they just announced this to the world. This is really good for us, really good for us because access and this building on the world stage now so people are paying attention.

JOSH: Craig you have given us so many data points and insights in this interview this has just been phenomenal and where can people connect with you? How can they connect with open doors.

CRAIG: Absolutely. So if you want to get a hold of me directly-- I'm on Facebook, for sure. I think I'm Craig Patrick Kennedy on there. That's my main thing. I don't do anything on Instagram. I'm not

really on Twitter, although Open Doors is on Twitter. Now I also have a personal Website as well and I still do a lot of local and state accessibility projects mostly and that's CPA consulting online dot com.

JOSH: Well, all very eye opening with a few of those data points that I think the listeners are going to really be interested in. So this has just been an amazing journey that you've been able to share with us today. So thank you so much!