

## **Explorable | Season One, Episode Six: Transcript of interview with Mark Jones**

**Josh:** Everybody welcome to the latest episode of Explorable, the podcast where we connect with guests who share about how they make their destinations more Explorable for people with disabilities-- everywhere.

Before we introduce our guests... Toby, I want to ask you-- Have you ever been to the happiest place on earth?

**Toby:** I have actually been to two of the happiest places on earth-- both in Orlando and California. So a little bit about my background for everybody listening. I grew up in Anaheim California and was about three minutes from Disneyland and went to Walt Disney elementary school.

**Josh:** So I've been a fan of Disney and I think that gives everybody a hint of who we've got on the show today. Everybody please give a great welcome to Mark Jones. Mark is the manager of accessibility and services for guests with disabilities for the Walt Disney World Resort and other Disney resort properties. I'd love for Mark to share a little bit about how he connects with people with disabilities and makes Disney more Explorable. Welcome to the show, Mark.

**Mark:** Josh, thank you, I appreciate the opportunity to join both you and Toby on the show today.

**Josh:** You're from Tennessee, correct?

**Mark:** Yes, I am a Tennessee graduate. I went to high school in Knoxville as well. I lived in Nashville for a few years as well. So I am familiar with some of the smaller towns in the area. I think my favorite is still... Let's see.... Batcave .That's still a town in Tennessee? I think so.

But yeah, yeah I get a chance to go back every now and then and see some friends. So it's always a pleasure to get over there.

**Toby:** The little town I grew up in in Chester County is kind of sweet-- It's called Sweet Lips.

**Josh:** Sweet Lips!?!

**Toby:** Yup. Sweet Lips, Tennessee. ANd very near to Sweet Lips is... Frog Jump and Lizard Lick. All real towns. Yep. None as good as Toad Suck,Arkansas.

**Mark:** Oh goodness. I think they win. Wow.

**Josh:** So, tell us a little bit more about you, Mark. Your background at Disney and maybe go into what a day in the life of your job looks like, and how you help people with disabilities connect better with the Magic Kingdom?

**Mark:** Happy to do that. So I just celebrated my twenty-third year as a full time cast member at Disney! And I've had a great journey!

Lots of great opportunities over those 23 years. But my passion, or my connection to this work really started when I was a child. I am-- for all of you who love acronyms-- I am what's known as a C-O-D-A. So coda. And a CODA is a child of deaf adults. So my parents are deaf. My only sibling is my brother Paul and he is ALSO deaf. So I am the only person in my family who is not deaf, which meant that sign language was the language of choice in our home. ESL is how I communicated with my parents and my brother.

My brother and my mother both went to the American School for the deaf which is in West Hartford Connecticut. Actually the first school for the deaf and United States established way back in 1817. So a lot of passion and a lot of history, if you will, that was part of my upbringing being in that town where deafness and Deaf Education sort of started-- that just sort of got me on the path. I will say from time to time perhaps kicking and screaming a little bit.

My parents certainly leveraged me as their interpreter for many things. So when we would go to the doctor's office, we would go to wherever this all predated the ACA and although Connecticut was a fairly progressive state still. Their ability to get an interpreter was you know a little few and far between. So I did that and served that role as I grew up and it just sort of became a part of what I did. I also answered the phone at home when somebody would call.

So that was just part of my upbringing and my father was very active in the deaf community. So we did a lot of events in and around New England that were for the deaf and my dad was super passionate about having the whole family come along. So that was great. So that sort of translated into as I started thinking about what I wanted to do and as I got older... and so I started thinking about those opportunities. But like many children who had deaf parents the last thing I wanted to do when I was younger was to be an interpreter.

I had already done that. I'd kind of checked that box in my head... but I wanted to go into broadcasting. That's sort of where I wanted to be. I think you might tell that I have a bit of a knack for it and people are always telling me, "Gosh you sound that guy on the radio!" So I don't know if that's just sort of part of my upbringing from watching probably way too much TV.

I went to the University of Tennessee where I majored in broadcasting and communications and I thought that's kind of what I wanted to do. But while I was in college I did a little sort of soul searching. I actually came upon an opportunity in college as well to do an internship and that internship was at Walt Disney World. So I interned in college at Walt Disney World in Orlando. I worked at what was the Disney Hollywood Disney MGM Studios at the time. Today known as Disney's Hollywood Studios. I worked at an attraction that is near and dear to many Disney fans out there called The Great Movie Ride.

And I worked at The Great Movie Ride on two separate occasions but it really sort of grew that passion for Disney. My grandparents lived in Florida while I grew up. So a lot of visits from Connecticut to Florida for a vacation. So there was a connection already for Disney. I now had this internship opportunity but I was still going to get into broadcasting but then just some things happened, and I decided you know what I'm gonna do something else. And then an opportunity to be an interpreter presented itself.... and I thought I can actually get paid to be an interpreter. That sounds great!

So I did that for a little bit. I spent a year working as a professional interpreter. I got my certification as an interpreter, but I still have that Disney craving and an opportunity presented itself where I was able to join a newly formed team called "services for guests with disabilities." And that's the team that today, I lead here at Walt Disney World. So it's been quite a journey as I said but it started way back when my passion started way back when with just my sort of family connection.

So I know that was a super long answer to your question but hopefully that adds for the listeners just a bit more context about my sort of passion around this work.

**Toby:** Yeah. We love hearing the personal story Mark and thanks for sharing that.

**Mark:** You know us who live the disability experience can more deeply empathize with our customers and guests and people who consume our products and it gives us a great deal of insight into how we can make things more inclusive especially for people with accessibility needs.

**Toby:** I know you hear from the "community" in your role. I'm sure you do. So when you do hear from people with disabilities, just you know kind of getting into the nuts and bolts of your day to day -- What are you getting feedback on? Like what are the features or assistive technology use or guest services that people with disability guests with disabilities are giving you feedback on?

**Mark:** Yeah great question, Toby, so I'll also add along my Disney journey I actually spent one year working at Disneyland Paris... and then I also spent seven of my years with the services for guests with disabilities almost eight of those years I spent actually at the Disneyland Resort.

So although I was physically based at Disneyland Resort, I was providing leadership for our services on both coasts. We've had some organizational moves and some things have happened in more recent years. So today, as we speak, my role is specific to the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando. But I do have a counterpart at the Disneyland Resort who also manages the accessibility work there and we chat multiple times a day and certainly want to make decisions in lockstep. Also leveraging partners. So Toby back to your question.

Disability is a part of every conversation we have. The big reason for that is well why not. Right. So we're very much of the mindset and I personally am very much of the mindset that accessibility leads to great experiences for any guest including those with disabilities but also for

those without disabilities. You start taking out stairs and guess what.... That's great for everybody. You start taking out curb cuts. That's great for everybody. You start captioning monitors in your park. That's great for everybody.

So it's that kind of mentality that goes into our decision making. I sometimes like to explain my role and my team's role. I'm using a Disney character. We're kind of like the Jiminy Cricket, if you will, of the company in that we're the conscience that provides insight and expertise when it comes to decision making around accessibility for the parks and resorts. Our segment that I report under we've got a super long name now we're called "Disney Parks Experiences and Products."

You'll hear it referred to as that or "DEP" is the sort of the acronym there. But we are constantly part of conversations when it comes to what we're looking to do in the future. We're also part of conversations of opportunities that are in front of us today. Guests, for example, who have unique questions about services that they may wish to leverage. We have great partners out there who communicate information to our guests. The website provides a lot of information. But even with those things sometimes guests have very unique questions.

So I and my team are able to kind of go one step further if we need to-- to sort of further elaborate on specific services we have and the services really run the gamut. I mean when we talk about services we always speak of sort of the five categories mobility hearing visual cognitive sometimes called intellectual or developmental... and then we also have service animals. So those are the categories that we focus on when we're talking about services.

The website reflects that information and then that's that's what we kind of hone in on when we're thinking about a new experience, like "Hey how are we going to check all those boxes service wise for those different categories of guests with disabilities?"

**Toby:** I just appreciate you, Mark, for pointing out that inclusive design is good design. I think that's really important for our listeners to understand that when you're starting your disability inclusion journey this doesn't have to be a burden or some add on or retrofit.

**Mark:** This is a mindset that we want for people to shift their paradigm of thinking into and that we just want to make our products and services more accessible for everyone. And by focusing on those of us who need it the most, we inherently make our products and services better for everyone. So I appreciate that call out. Absolutely. And if I can just mention one thing... I think you all may have heard in any Disney readings you might have done, about the culture of working at Disney.

We always talk about what we've historically called "the Four keys." We've got Safety Courtesy, Show and Efficiency. Those are the things our cast members are expected to do when it comes to interacting with guests and as we think about things we've actually very recently added a fifth key-- that is "Inclusion" which has been really a key all along. We've just not made it front center and pointed it out. So we've added now that fifth key of inclusion to ensure that we as a

company are going in the direction that you just referenced which is inclusion for everybody including guests with disabilities.

**Josh:** That is fabulous! That fifth key-- but Walt Disney talked about Disney parks and Disney philosophy always evolving and always changing and so that's great to hear that it's continuing to change and be more progressive for people with disabilities and everybody from a diversity equity and inclusion standpoint.

**Mark:** Absolutely and I think you guys have probably done some reading, you know, there were some great ideas that seemed very appropriate when they were developed back in the 50s and the 60s and the 70s and as time moves forward... we want to move forward with some of those ideas and ensuring that we are being inclusive to everyone. So you've probably for example done some readings of Splash Mountain, and how we're going to be rebranding that experience over the years. We've modified Pirates of the Caribbean, for example, to the scenes within Pirates Of The Caribbean.

So there's always that sort of goal and drive to do that and we certainly don't claim to have everything figured out, but the good part that makes me feel good is we're having the conversations...and we have the right people having the conversations to make a good decision not only get a good business decision but a good decision just for our guests for our cast. So I feel very proud if you will be a part of this and on this journey and all these things that we're doing and of course the last year has added some new wrinkles into the fabric of how we solve things.

**Josh:** We know, of course, so many things have evolved at Disney, and you've been at Disney for a little while. Tell us about the evolution of conversations and commitments when it comes to disability whether it's technology advances or whether it's certainly physical accessibility. What are some things that you've seen or been a part of to be able to welcome more people with disability over the years at Disney parks and Walt Disney World?

**Mark:** So Josh when when I started within the department the ACA was still relatively new and a lot of the implementation was still sort of in progress. So at the time our leadership took a pretty strong stand to the point of-- hey we need a group of people who are going to focus on this. We're not just going to make accessibility a part of somebody's job in H.R. for somebody who's job over here in a different department... We're going to create a team that focuses on accessibility and that's what that team is going to do.

So with that the commitment was kind of right there out of the gate and that would have been right around early '96, '97 that we made that decision to do that. So with that the team then started becoming a part of decisions moving forward when it came to ride design ensuring that if we are able to design a right vehicle that can accommodate somebody in a wheelchair why would we not do that.

I mean unless it's just not possible because of physics and safety-- why would we not do that? About that time we said-- why would we not want to provide sign language on a more regular cadence for our guests guests who are deaf travel like everybody else? I used to come every year with my parents... Why not provide them an opportunity to experience some of our shows on our attractions with an interpreter? Captioning is a great service for everybody. So when I started on this journey, we were talking about what we do with that I mean captioning a TV program. How do you caption A MOVING ride? How do you caption something like a Pirates of the Caribbean?

So it was at that point we developed our own internal way to caption moving experiences using a very early version of like a Palm Pilot. if you remember those from back in the day and allowing technology at the time allow us to create those great experiences for our guests if you guys would let me by the way I've got a pretty quick little story about that that I hope is of interest to our listeners.

So we have a portable piece of technology that provides three distinct services: it provides assistive listening, which is of course amplified for somebody with mild to moderate hearing loss. It also provides audio description for somebody who is blind or has low vision and describes in audio visual elements of an experience. The third service it offers is something called hand-held captioning which as the name implies is a way we caption moving attractions for somebody who is deaf or hard of hearing.

So when we were developing hand-held captioning we were the only people that had it. We weren't buying this from somebody else we were kind of developing this in-house so we needed to troubleshoot and ensure that what we had was gonna be a good product. So we did testing as we always do that testing many times including cast members to common experience things and provide feedback. We have a diverse city group called, Enable.

That also previously known as cast able but Enable is one of our diversity groups that provides feedback on design as we leverage them as sort of a business partner that's made up of cast members with varying disabilities. But at any rate we were testing hand-held captioning and this was I don't know late late 90s I guess something like that in the attraction that we happen to be testing at this time was it's a small world. So for those of you that don't know what that is it's a very slow moving boat ride.

It goes through various country scenes and those countries have little dolls dressed in traditional outfits and there's this song that plays throughout the ride very you know it was one of those world's fair attractions that sort of sort of predated even Disneyland. So at any rate we were testing handheld captioning and I had happened to have my brother who I mentioned is deaf in town. So I actually had him come and join me and I said hey I'm going to give you this piece of equipment. We're going to go on. It's a small world and you're just going to kind of tell me what you think.

So we begin our journey and it's a small world. And he's looking at the little screen and it's you know captioning and he's looking at the screen and I'm making sure that it's doing its thing. And then I asked him about midway through and I said hey what do you think so far. And he looked

at the screen and said "Seems OK... but I think the one this one you gave me is broken." And I was like --- broken!?! All right. So we kept going until the end of the ride. And now I want the download. I want him to tell me his spots. So I ask him again.

I said, "so do you think people that are deaf are going to use this?" He says, "yeah, I think it's a great idea. But I think you need to fix this one because I think this one is broken." And it was literally as he said that it was almost like he had a eureka moment and he literally said or signed to me. Wait a minute. You mean it's the same song over and over and over and over again. Now I know why hearing people hate this ride I'm a little bit smaller like the next guy.

But as you know that song sometimes gets in your head. This was the first time my brother kind of got it. I mean I had told him about the song growing up. He never really understood. But now he had this device that was capturing the essence of the experience. And now he understood that that song was super equal access even if it's not the most pleasant experience.

**Toby:** I was thinking Mark, I have a Disney quote on one of my slides. And I'm gonna have to paraphrase-- "Do what you do so well that you know people don't tell their friends," or something like that. And I think that's very poignant because you know Disney is really leaning into this space and obviously doing it really well. And so I'm wondering if you would mind sharing with our listeners-- who might be daunted by the idea of getting started?

Because you know it's a big space that we're working in and with well over a billion people in the world having unique experiences with disabilities. How do people get started? What have you learned and what considerations can you offer to our listeners to help them get started on their disability inclusion journey?

**Mark:** Great question, Toby, and one of the things that we talk about a lot internally and then externally when we talk with other partners that that we have outside of Disney is focus on guest service and not compliance.

If you focus on guest service the compliance kind of comes with it. There are some businesses out there that unfortunately are so worried about what the rulebook says what the 88 calls for and all of those kinds of things that they just get into the minutia of those kinds of things versus just saying hey what's the right thing to do for our guests. And again that always checks the compliance box. So that's I think probably my number one message for those partners out there who are beginning this journey. I think I should also be bold.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask for help. You've got a lot of partners out there I mean obviously you've got a network of folks you work with you've got big organizations out there like a ARPA which supports theme parks in general you've got organizations out there like disability and and some others which leverage a lot of companies and what they're doing and the accessibility space. So don't be afraid to go and ask somebody else who's perhaps been on this journey a little bit longer to say hey this is what we've got in front of us.

**Toby:** What do you think now? You know we're in unique times now. Things are a little bit different. And of course there's always the part about funding. You know sometimes people will argue-- well accessibility is expensive.

**Mark:** And I think my answer to that is... well no not always. It could be... but it's not always expensive. Many times accessibility can be done for literally hundreds of dollars above and beyond what you might have budgeted. And if you're talking about a project that's hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars we're not talking about a lot of money.

So in general you know don't worry about the finance. Yes it's important you know you need to make sure that you're holding to your budget but at the same time don't don't let that sort of talk ourselves out of something and also be thinking about accessibility from the beginning. Don't let accessibility be the conversation that comes in when you're at 90 percent on something. Have it be like part of the blue sky. Hey we're gonna do this awesome. We're gonna do this, we're gonna do that.

Let's talk about accessibility now because that also dictates what makes sense moving forward and at the end of the day as I said earlier accessibility in almost every situation benefits everybody. I mean it benefits people without disabilities as well. I love that you point out the paradigm of thinking they're not not being compliance thinking but being inclusion driven because I believe that compliance driven thinking leads. It's a race to the bottom. You know you're just seeing how much you can do for how little money and just barely compliant you know. But if we shift that paradigm to customer focus inclusion thinking then we can begin to see a return on the investment.

**Toby:** You pretty much answered this question and I don't think any of us really would think any different-- But Mark, what would you say to a business that might not think about welcoming people with disability?

What's the business case for welcoming people with disabilities? And I'm not sure if you have any stats or numbers that show how many people with disabilities connect with Walt Disney World but we'd love to hear your thoughts on the business case for welcoming people with disabilities to attractions.

**Mark:** Yeah, I think you know a lot of that just lies and the statistics that we all have available to us. You know you'll read some statistics that say one in five and others I've read say one in four people have a disability of some sort. So you're talking about a big percentage of the population that has a disability of some sort or just with that. Why would you not be thinking about that, right?!?

So that I think kind of starts the conversation and you know there are studies out there that also talk about how much disposable income people with disabilities have and people with disabilities want to travel and they're going to seek out places that they know either by personal

experience by friends experience by acquaintance by reading online they're going to seek out those places that welcome them whatever their particular need might be whether it's I need sign language interpretation-- I need assistive listening I want audio description: I want materials in Braille. I want to have an opportunity for my child with autism to have a great experience. I mean those are all things people think about when they travel and as you both know and as your listeners all know, people with disabilities spend a fair amount of time preparing for a visit somewhere. So they're doing their homework.

So a lot of it for us is getting the word out letting people know what we offer and what we have and then being able to get a little deeper if they have very specific questions. But you know that's. We know this is a market.

It's an opportunity to allow a much wider number of people to visit Walt Disney World and Disneyland and or other properties around the world by ensuring that we are inclusive and that we're providing those attractions and experiences for people with disabilities. Thanks for that Mark. It's been so wonderful hearing from you. You're so articulate and and and passionate about the space and I really appreciate it.

**Toby:** And I think, you know, before we wrap up here-- I wonder if you could tell our listeners with disabilities who haven't yet visited a Disney property where they can get started learning about what accessible features and opportunities they might have available to them when visiting.

**Mark:** Yeah, of course, Toby. So you know much like any business we're always going to recommend that you start visiting by visiting our Website. So for a visit to Walt Disney World in Orlando it is Disney World-- It's literally Disney World dot com.

You can also go to DisneyLand dot com if you're seeking to visit our partners on the West Coast. Or you can just do a search of Disney and then you'll be able to get either or. But the Website is a great place to start.

We also have it within our Website at Walt Disney World something called my Disney experience. My Disney experience is sort of an app based option or tool that guests use once they actually arrive at Walt Disney World.

So think of it almost as like your vacation planner that happens to be in a you know an electronic form and it allows you to do reservations that allows you to look at maps it allows you to get information about services. So it all kind of is found within my Disney Experience app which is another great resource. There are plenty of other more unofficial resources out there as well. You know some of those have great information, some of those you might have to dig a little bit but I know there's some great resources out there.

We always have representatives available as well if you just prefer to pick up the phone and talk to somebody. Our guest information team can help you with whatever that question might be and if it becomes one of those questions that's a bit more unique that maybe requires a little bit more assistance. That's where my team gets involved. So one of those representatives would say

hey we have somebody on the phone. They have this very unique question we've kind of perused our information. You don't know how to answer this, would you be able to help them? So we do that on a pretty regular basis so long short of it is-- the planning tool on the Website has the ability to call in as your primary means for really preparing and I think you all know this but it's a big place. I mean there are a lot of properties here in Florida. So preplanning in general makes a whole lot of sense, especially if you have a disability. Really-- plan ahead instead of winging it and showing up and saying -- Here I am -- probably going to lead you to maybe miss some things that you might otherwise want to do and then of course in the environment we're currently in.

We actually have a reservation system for park visits. So if you're looking to visit a particular theme park you actually have to reserve your space to be able to visit that park on a specific day. So that's a little bit new if you will over the last few months. So just for your listeners awareness that's something that we're asking all guests to leverage is hey make sure you go ahead and book your visit but you also need to book where you want to go on which day because that's now something that you know has some maximum capacity tied to one last question.

**Josh:** Last question, and it's a bit off the cuff-- Mark what's the what's your favorite ride?

**Mark:** Well I would have told you in the past, Josh, the Great Movie Ride. I really, really enjoyed working there and it was a great experience and it's one that's really memorable to me. But I actually really enjoy Pirates Of The Caribbean.

If I was to pick a ride it's my favorite-- it is Pirates. I've had a chance to now ride three versions of pirates. The one of course here at Walt Disney World the one at the Disneyland Resort and the one at Disneyland Paris and they're all familiar.

But they all have their unique pieces and parts. And I just love that whole sort of mystique of that period and that time. I mean if there's a Pirates of the Caribbean movie on TV I'm probably gonna watch it even if I've seen it 50 times. So that's just one of those things that I just have a real passion around.

**Josh:** That's awesome. You're a man after my own heart, a pirate. For me as well. Mark Jones-- everybody! Thank you so much, Mark on behalf of Toby, Brad, myself, and everybody at Explorable, Thank you so much. And we'll see you next time.