

Explorable | Season One, Episode 8: Transcript of interview with Kerry Mauger

Josh Loebner:

Hey everybody, welcome to the latest edition of Explorable podcast, where we find out about destinations and disability and how they both connect for the better. Toby, just a quick check how are you doing today?

Toby Willis:

I'm doing all right, Josh. Thanks for asking, as always, and excited to meet Kerry and learn more about the work she's doing.

Josh Loebner:

Before we meet our guest, Toby, I've got some questions to ask.

Toby Willis:

All right.

Josh Loebner:

So have you ever been in an airport and just maybe kind of felt a little uncomfortable or had some trouble going through TSA or just some challenges?

Toby Willis:

Oh my gosh, yeah. I travel quite a lot, or I used to travel pre COVID quite a lot for my work and for pleasure. And I navigate the airport using a guide dog, which introduces a level of complexity when going through airport security, for sure, and that adds a lot of stress and anxiety to my trip.

Josh Loebner:

Definitely. I think we all, regardless of ability or disability, have some story where there's maybe tension at an airport, and today we're talking with Kerry Mauger, she is the Special Projects Manager for The Arc, and also drives initiatives with Wings for Autism. Kerry, welcome to the show. We'd love to hear a little bit more about you and what you do with Wings for Autism.

Kerry Mauger:

Hi, Josh. Yeah. Thanks for, first of all, thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here with you guys. I am Manager of Special Project at The Arc's national office in Washington, DC. I started with The Arc about eight years ago. I work on the program sides of the organization running a few of our different national initiatives and about three or four

years ago, I think it is now, I took over for the Wings for Autism program. So my main role for that program is to help grow and expand it from the national level. I seek out a new airport and airline partners to work with, and based on inquiries or requests that we've received from families, I try to target specific areas to bring the program to. We're in about 34 states so far, but we haven't been in everyone, so I'm trying to continue to grow the program and extend it to more locations throughout the U.S.

Josh Loebner:

And just as a quick follow-up, some of the questions that I asked initially of Toby and shared a few challenges when it comes to airports and inclusion of people with disabilities, we often think about accessibility. Accessibility, for example, for blind people, people who are deaf, or people who have mobility disabilities. Tell us a little bit more specifically about what Wings for Autism does when it comes to people who have new or diverse disabilities.

Kerry Mauger:

So Wings for Autism is essentially a trial run of all the steps involved in the air travel process. As you guys said earlier, there's a lot of different things that go into getting on a plane and taking a flight from the lights and the airport to the crowds, to the noise, to the uncertainty of going through TSA security. There's a lot of unknowns and so people are afraid to fly because they don't know how their loved one with a disability is going to react to all those different obstacles in one place and it can be a little bit of a sensory overload.

Kerry Mauger:

So our program basically allows families to come, go through all the steps involved in the travel process to learn how their loved one is going to handle it, to familiarize them with the process, and to give them the skills and confidence that they need so that they are able to travel in the future. As a bonus too, it's also a learning experience for the airport and airline and TSA employees.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, I think that's such an important point is for the able-bodied staff to understand what the disabled traveler is experiencing and having that opportunity to learn and prepare. Hey Kerry, I just wanted to clarify for many of our listeners who might be new. At the top of the call, you mentioned that you work for Arc, and I'm not sure if all of our listeners know what Arc is, and so I'm wondering if you'll just step back just a little bit for a second before we get further into the details and tell us what Arc is. And also, if you don't mind sharing why you do this work and what's your disability story? What's your relationship to the community?

Kerry Mauger:

Sure. So The Arc is one of the oldest and largest nonprofits that serves and advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We are a membership organization. Like I said, I work at the national office in DC, but we have over 600 state and local chapters spread throughout the U.S. that are doing on the groundwork, doing everything from state policy to providing daily support, vocational and employment services, and training and things like that. So we kind of run the gamut of doing a little bit of everything with the individuals that we serve.

Kerry Mauger:

We also, at the national level, we run a couple national scope projects and we have a policy team here that fights for the rights of our individuals at the federal level as well. So the main goal of The Arc is to make sure that people with intellectual disabilities are included in all aspects of their community and can live full and supportive lifestyles.

Toby Willis:

That's great. And how did you get involved?

Kerry Mauger:

So I don't have a personal connection to disability. I have a health and fitness educational background, so I was originally hired to work at The Arc through a new health program that they were starting. So that's what brought me to The Arc and working with people with disabilities. And I found it really interesting because in all of my studies on health and fitness, disabilities were briefly touched, but we really didn't go into it nearly as much as it needs to be discussed and people need to learn about. So I feel like it was a great learning experience when I first joined The Arc and I've just been excited every day since then to learn more and more and to grow and to help support people with disabilities every day.

Toby Willis:

I think that's great. We need allies, we need advocates. Even though there's well over a billion people in the world with disabilities, I think it takes a concerted effort. This is a social movement and it takes allies and advocates to really scale and sustain disability inclusion. So thank you for the work that you're doing. I've often heard how our able-bodied allies enjoy working in this space because it's an interesting challenge. And I appreciate that. And again, we appreciate your support and your allyship in the community.

Kerry Mauger:

Cool. Thank you.

Josh Loebner:

Even without my disability, my wife would say I'm a challenge, but ...

Toby Willis:

Josh, you're challenging. So am I.

Josh Loebner:

So Kerry, what are the experiences like? I'm sure there are lots of minute details, but if you could just at a high level for the families who experience it for the first time and for the airports that you onboard, what is Wings for Autism kind of from a process standpoint?

Kerry Mauger:

Sure. So basically like I said, Wings for Autism is kind of like a travel or a trial run process. So we go through all the steps involved in air travel as if you're going to take a real flight. So when we hold events families come by coming to the airport and they check-in at the ticket counter where they get a fake boarding pass that they use to then go through TSA security. The security screening process we've learned can be very nerve-racking for first-time flyers if you're unsure about the machines and the process and the different noises that are involved. So we encourage our participants to bring a small carry-on to the event so they can learn about what happens to your bag as it goes through the conveyor belt, on the x-ray machine, and understand that they get it back on the other side. They kind of learn about the x-ray machines and how to stand and hold their hands up, things like that.

Kerry Mauger:

And then once we do the security screening process, families find their way to the gate area. We always do like to build in a little bit of wait time at the gate area because as I'm sure we've all known from traveling, waiting can be a large part of the air travel process. So this time allows for families to see what supports they need if they were to take a real flight, whether they realize they need noise-canceling headphones or more snacks or video games or things to entertain themselves. So things like that that they can kind of do a trial and error run, see what supports they need further for a real flight.

Kerry Mauger:

Then participants board the plane. On the plane, the flight attendants run through basically their generic safety procedures, they close the overhead bins because those

always make a loud noise so we want people to be aware of that as well. And then we just encourage our families to explore every aspect of the plane, from the tray tables to the window coverings and seats. We always encourage them to look at the bathrooms, as those are obviously very small and can be problematic for many. And then we just want them to interact with the airline staff, the flight attendants, and pilots.

Kerry Mauger:

We always say the best way to learn is by asking questions and interact, so we want our families to learn about flying by asking questions, and in turn we want the flight attendants and pilots to learn about our families by asking questions back. So we want it to be like a hands-on learning experience as well. And as a bonus too, a lot of times we will have the cockpit open and participants can come inside and see the cockpit and take pictures and ask questions about that. And that's kind of a real fun experience to get to see the inside of a cockpit and see the pilot and stuff like that.

Toby Willis:

You touched on this earlier, Kerry, that an added bonus to this activity, which I see is almost integral as part of a training exercise with the airport staff. What's the feedback you get from them after the trainings?

Kerry Mauger:

So we've received really positive feedback from airport airlines and TSA employees that volunteer their time for our events. A lot of times, if it's the first time doing an event, sometimes the airports or airlines can get nervous when I tell them I'm going to bring a large group of people with disabilities to the airport and for some of them, it's their first time really interacting or dealing with people with disabilities. So they're just a little bit nervous, but after every event, they always come up to me and say how great of an experience it was and how beneficial it was for them. And I've even had many come up to me and joke that they think it was more beneficial for them than it was the actual participants. So I think that we've received really good feedback from the airports and airlines that we've been working with.

Kerry Mauger:

We also do, in addition to the actual event, before the event, we do a short classroom-style training with the airport, airline, and TSA staff that are volunteering for the event as well. I like to think of the training as a disability 101 course. We walk them through what's going to happen in the event and then we go over autism and disabilities and just some common traits and characteristics that are associated with them. And then we also go over just some typical scenarios that could arise during the event or in

the future when people with disabilities are flying and best ways to approach those situations in the event or in real life afterwards.

Kerry Mauger:

So it's a little bit of a soft skills training as well. That time also allows people to maybe ask some questions that they feel a little uncomfortable asking to a person with a disability or a family member. Maybe they're a little more sensitive questions, but we want them to ask it in that space and feel comfortable because we feel it's the best way that people are going to get educated and learn about people with disabilities is to ask those kinds of difficult questions. So we really feel that pairing kind of the skills from the classroom training and then the real-life event is really beneficial for our partners for this.

Josh Loebner:

It seems like over the past few years that autism and neurodiversity to an extent have become more accepted and part of more conversations and commitments, whether it's through destinations in marketing, or just more broadly in the disability community. Have you seen in your work over the time with Wings for Autism conversations change when it comes to being able to bring up what you do? Is it a little bit easier now? Can you share maybe some things from when you started to where you are now, how the conversations may have changed hopefully for the better?

Kerry Mauger:

Yeah, and I think they are getting for the better now too. I mean, I think, like I said, sometimes the first time we have events, people are a little worrisome and just concerned about what's going to happen. But a lot of times our events, once they host it once, they come back every year to host another event. So I think we have around a 75% or 80% repeat rate of events that if they hold it once they continue to hold events again because they see the benefits of it.

Kerry Mauger:

And I think also having these events makes people kind of think about different things and really think about the supports needed for passengers with disabilities. So we've seen a couple of sensory rooms get created based off of some conversations and partnerships from our local chapters with these airports, which is so great to see those happening. And I've had other airports contacting me asking about sensory rooms and the benefits of them. So I think people are starting to realize that these are some changes that are going to be really effective for this customer base and to really think about the different supports that are needed.

Kerry Mauger:

So while I think that there still is a lot of improvement that needs to be made, I think these conversations are now starting and developing, and I think that's the first step in really helping to improve these processes and make changes for the right direction. I think a lot of the airports and people that we've been working with really do want to help make this process easier for people with disabilities and they really truly do want to learn about the steps that are needed to create that change.

Toby Willis:

Kerry, I live in Seattle and I've heard Sea-Tac airport here has a quite robust program around this experience. I'm wondering if you're familiar with that program and how do other airports hear about Wings for Autism. How are you getting the word out?

Kerry Mauger:

And that event is a great one. That's a really big one. I know the one at Sea-Tac airport in Seattle. I think we've had that for several years. I think they're actually one of our first events ever for the first year of the program, and they are very popular there. I think we fill up in less than a day or probably even a couple hours maybe, and they always do have a waiting list that's very large. So we're very proud of that event and the success that they have had so far in what they've done.

Kerry Mauger:

As far as advertising for events, we do have a Wings for Autism webpage on The Arc's national webpage that we list all of our upcoming events throughout the country on, and the registration pages for those. Every event is kind of done on a first-come-first-serve basis, and there is limited seating based on the plane size so that's why we have registration links for all the different areas. Sadly, if you go there right now, there is nothing listed because we are at a little bit of a standstill due to COVID-19 safety precautions. But once everything is back up and it's safe to hold events again, we would house all of our lists of upcoming events there, and we'll continually add events throughout the year as they are being added and coming up. So you can always check back there to see which locations are being added.

Kerry Mauger:

We also like to try to promote the program from a national level by doing things like this, like podcasts and interviews and any media that we can get. I think social media is a very powerful tool now as well to just promote events and word of mouth too. A lot of families will come to an event and then we hear that they tell five of their friends and then I get contacted by them, so that also helps a lot from past participants.

Kerry Mauger:

But otherwise, I partner with a lot of really great local chapters who actually implement the events in their area. For example, the one in Seattle as well, and they are really the all-stars doing all the work on the ground and promote to local families and recruit to the local participants for their events, and they do such a fantastic job getting the word out and recruiting people in their communities. So it's kind of a combination of both of that, that's been largely added to our success in that.

Josh Loebner:

And how many airports, just as a follow-up, have participated in the program in the U.S.?

Kerry Mauger:

So we are at, I want to say 70, 75, somewhere around there. I am blanking on the exact number right now, but I think it's about 75.

Josh Loebner:

That's great, and I'm sure that translates to hundreds, if not thousands of passengers and families that have participated in the program.

Kerry Mauger:

Yes, definitely. We've worked with, I think, 16 different airlines, we've been in 34 states, so we still have quite a few states to come to, but we're slowly growing it.

Josh Loebner:

And that leads me to my next question. What do you feel like is the business case for welcoming people with a disability? I think those numbers prove it out, but are there any other points that you could bring up as to the value of doing this from a business case?

Kerry Mauger:

Sure. From the business side for airports and airlines, I think these events are really reaching out to a whole new customer base of individuals that never thought that traveling by air would be an option for them. So these families come to an event, they become familiarized with the process and gain the skills and competence that they need to make air travel a possibility. There's a lot of unknowns about air traveling, especially with a loved one with a disability, like I said, from the lights and the noise and things like that, so families don't want to risk buying a plane ticket and then have it be unsuccessful and take the risk of losing all of that money that they've saved up to be able to take this

trip. So these events really allow for families to come and test it out and see if this is a potentially a thing that they can actually do in the future.

Kerry Mauger:

And some people it may not work for, they may need to come to a few events to be able to get comfortable with it, but for many others, it does kind of allow them to see that this is a realistic thing that they can do. So it just really kind of opens up the doors to so many new adventures. So I kind of see it as a win-win all around where our families get now to the chance to travel and experience new things and the airports and airlines reach a whole new customer base that is willing to buy airplane tickets and come to their airport and purchase foods and goods in their stores and their restaurants in the airport as well.

Toby Willis:

So, Kerry, I'm wondering if people, families, and travelers with autism can contact you directly or your program directly. How would they go about doing that?

Kerry Mauger:

Yep. They can contact me directly at Wingsforautism@thearc.org by email, or they can also go to our website, which is thearc.org/Wings to learn more about our program and events coming up. And my email address will also be on that webpage as well.

Toby Willis:

Awesome. Thanks for sharing that, and it's been such a pleasure to get to meet you and learn about the work that you're doing. Thanks for coming on the show.

Kerry Mauger:

No, thank you guys so much for having me. This has been great.

Josh Loebner:

Kerry Mauger, everyone, with Wings for Autism. Kerry, thanks so much. It's been a pleasure. This has been an Explorable podcast. Thanks so much. Toby, Brad, take care.

Toby Willis:

Explorable is a Designsensory, original production in collaboration with the Travel Ability Summit and produced by Brad Carpenter. Find out more about our productions, podcast, and insight at designsensory.com/originals and TravelAbilitySummit.com. You can connect with Josh Loebner or myself, Toby Willis, on LinkedIn.

