

## **Explorable | Season Two, Episode Thirteen: Transcript of interview with Chelsea Rodriguez and Heather Karch**

**Josh Loebner:**

Hey, everyone. Thanks for listening to Explorable, the premier podcast about travel, disability, and accessibility. I'm joined by cohost Toby Willis. Toby, how are you doing?

**Toby Willis:**

I'm doing all right, Josh. How about yourself?

**Josh Loebner:**

Toby, I'm doing great. It's a new year, and we've got some new conversations to be able to talk about.

**Toby Willis:**

That's right.

**Josh Loebner:**

Toby, I have a couple of questions to ask you before we introduce our guests.

**Toby Willis:**

All right.

**Josh Loebner:**

When's the last time you went to an airport?

**Toby Willis:**

Oh my goodness. I think the last time I was in an airport was coming home from London last March 15th. So I haven't been anywhere near an airport that I can recall since 11 months ago, almost, right?

**Josh Loebner:**

And it's been about the same time for me about a year. But today we're going to talk to two people who are connected to an airport every day. And it's not just any airport. Sometimes airports can be frustrating and challenging for people, but we're not going to talk about those challenges today. We've got a couple of great guests who are going to talk about amazing opportunities when it comes to accessibility and disability inclusion at the airport. And the airport we're talking about is SEA. The airport is in Seattle and it is an international airport. Today, the guests who are from SEA are Chelsea Rodriguez. Chelsea is SEA's Airport Volunteers and Customer Accessibility Manager and Heather Karch, Facilities and Infrastructure Architecture Manager. Welcome ladies,

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

Thank you. Thanks for having us.

**Josh Loebner:**

And if you guys could just take a quick couple of minutes and share more about each of your roles and responsibilities at the SEA airport?

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

Sure. I'm happy to start. My name is Chelsea and my role is to support the airport's volunteer program. And our volunteers are based in the customer service department. And their focus is really on enhancing the customer experience while acting as ambassadors, not just for the airport, but also for the region. And then the other part of my role is accessibility. So that's working really closely with Heather on accessibility initiatives, just to bring a customer service lens. They focus on all passengers, including those with disabilities and allow us to do more, basically.

**Heather Karch:**

Thanks for that start, Chelsea. I'm really excited to be here. This is Heather, and I'm an architect by training who is responsible for providing design guidance and direction for managing our existing architectural assets and just really getting involved with as many of the projects as we expand and renovate. And so within that role, I'm actually also the ADA coordinator, so that the Title 2, Section 504 coordinator. And as Chelsea mentioned, we work together. I'm more focused on the regulatory side and thinking about the facility impacts while she is taking the lead on the customer service angle.

**Toby Willis:**

That's awesome. I can say Chelsea and Heather, thank you so much for joining us. And SEA is my hometown airport. Those who have listened to the podcast before know I'm from Seattle. And I can say firsthand that the SEA airport is a great experience. And I'm wondering if you all have a disability story, or if you have an experience with disability that led you into this industry, working in this space?

**Heather Karch:**

You have a personal connection to disabilities or disability in general. On a personal note. And also just through my close family and close friends, people I know have struggled with mental illness. I have relatives with intellectual and developmental disabilities, auto-immune diseases, which a lot of times are part of that hidden disability category. And I think that was one of the reasons why the sunflower lanyard program really stood out to me as something I did want to push for because I think just the concept of really providing more awareness of hidden disabilities is really important because so many of us, I think it'd be hard to find someone who doesn't know someone or isn't at least friends with someone or related to someone with some level of disability. And even throughout your lifespan, having a disability as minor as wearing glasses or loss of hearing over time. So, I guess my connection, when I first took this job, it was focused on the architecture, but I will say the accessibility and working with these disability issues has really enhanced the position for me and there's a lot of fulfillment from it and I can see the difference I'm making in a different way than, than what I do in the built environment, just in the impact on people and the great stories we hear from the initiatives that we've started.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. Thanks for sharing that. It's very, I think it really helps deliver an excellent experience when we have empathy and understanding to inform our choices as leaders in this space.

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

Yeah. And I would say similar to Heather, I definitely have friends and family with disabilities. Ones that you would be considered hidden, such as autism and professionally, my background is in museums. I worked in museums for over a decade as a volunteer manager. And in that capacity, I had an opportunity to work with a wide range of volunteers of all ages and backgrounds, including volunteers with disabilities. We often welcomed volunteers through job-readiness programs. You may have job coaches as well as volunteers with disabilities who came in through just the traditional application process. And I just love that opportunity to work with people of all backgrounds. And also, I had the opportunity before I left for the airport to be on the team at the museum I was at that launched the first sensory-friendly morning program. And it was just incredibly rewarding. Basically, we dimmed the museum, we turned down the lights and the volume opened it up to a select number of people to keep the capacity down. And the feedback that we got, primarily from families who had children with autism or sensory processing disorders, was just incredibly positive. It was a really rewarding program to work on. And this past spring, when there was an opportunity on my team for me to expand my role to include accessibility and just jumped all over it, because I feel like it's something I have a background in working in within museums and I look forward to kind of expanding and bringing that museum background here to the airport.

**Josh Loebner:**

I love museums. I love airports. This is already a great conversation. So Heather and Chelsea, for people unfamiliar with SEA, or SEA, maybe you could share a little bit more. I know there was a recent rebranding and also, just some numbers that you could share about the airport if you have them. And I ask all that from the standpoint of accessibility and disability inclusion, there are a lot of airports in the US that are smaller than SEA. And to hear you be able to share the size and scope of your airport helps to contextualize that if airports of a larger size, such as yours can accomplish this, so can basically any airport.

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

So SEA is the eighth busiest airport in the nation, and just physically, we're an airport with one terminal and six concourses. And as far as our passenger account, as you would imagine, it's definitely been impacted by COVID. So in 2020, our passenger count was just over 20 million passengers, which is about 60% lower than the previous year in 2019, when it had almost 52 million travelers.

**Josh Loebner:**

Just as a follow-up any numbers on, for example, the sunflower lanyards, the number you distribute annually.

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

Yes. And I meant to mention that. Yeah. As far as the sunflower lanyards, since launching in October of 2019, we've given over 300. So I imagine if we were distributing this in a non-COVID world, it would have been more than that, but it just interesting timing for the program to launch.

**Josh Loebner:**

And for those listeners unfamiliar with the sunflower lanyards, can you just take a quick second and tell everybody what they're about?

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

Yeah. So, sunflower lanyards are a lanyard that passengers can optionally wear, which signals to staff that the wearer or a member in the wearer's family has a hidden disability, such as autism, PTSD, Crohn's disease, MS, et cetera. And that based off of that, they may need additional support or patience. And it's a program that launched at Gatwick Airport in London in 2016, and here at SEA, we were the first in the nation to launch it in October of 2019. And now it's offered at, I believe, seven total airports within the nation, and there's a lot of growing momentum. So I think Heather and I's hope is that it continues to grow and we'll see more of it in other national airports.

**Josh Loebner:**

Is there anything else, are there from an infrastructure facility or communication standpoint that you've taken a deeper dive when it comes to disability inclusion and accessible travel? And then a follow-up, are there any traveler stories that you can think of maybe that helped spur on some of these initiatives or that you've heard since you've enacted some of these projects or programs?

**Heather Karch:**

Well, thank you for that. I would love to tell you about a project that's underway now, and it's going to be opening soon, at least as a starting point, but we're really looking forward in early April to opening up our first sensory room. And this is a very specific space that we've designed with a focus on passengers with autism and other developmental or intellectual disabilities in mind, but really is open to any passenger. You know, you don't have to have a specific disability to use it because we know many passengers would benefit from a place where they can kind of calm themselves down and take a little break. It's a space that we've designed with specialized lighting and furniture with the intention of addressing some of the really specific sensory needs of like the vestibular or the appropriate receptive. And we had extensive stakeholder outreach, including families with these disabilities providing feedback. And we brought in occupational therapist who provided some professional feedback on this. And then as well, not just the physical space, one of the things that we came across when developing the design was looking at our wayfinding because signage and wayfinding is one of the things that has come up as a really critical thing for all passengers, but really wanting to make sure that passengers were able to get to this space and understand what it was. We realized that there's not a universal symbol right now that represents this type of space. So we had the opportunity to tap into the creative people that work here and developed a custom way-finding symbol that we also vetted with stakeholders that I hope makes sense to all and it leads people in the right direction. Other facility things, we have a really large restroom project, multi-year renovation of the restrooms, where we're doing things like including ambulatory stalls, which are smaller than true accessible stalls, but larger than a standard stall. And they also include handrails. So it's a great way to improve that experience for people.

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

Yeah. I was just going to say, I really am impressed how we embrace technology and innovation at SEA. And some examples of that would be our SEA app, which was recently updated to a greater highlight accessibility. It has accessible paths where you would be guided without having to use an escalator for example. Also our IRA. We were one of the first airports on the West coast, I believe to utilize IRA where passengers who are blind or low vision can use IRA and music free minutes here at the airport to connect with an agent who will help them navigate their airport. So I think that's just a great example, us embracing technology, basically.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. I love that service. I'm a frequent user of the free IRA at the airport, yeah. And I just want to call out, I appreciate the indoor service dog really various, as well as an international traveler. I need to have access to that. After getting off a 10 hour flight, my dog appreciates the opportunity.

**Heather Karch:**

That's great to hear. And we're definitely working towards more that our actual rooms with our international arrivals facility, we have a built-in space or what I call built-in space versus these spaces that are just temporary.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. And I think the community really appreciates the effort, regardless if it's tucked in a corner behind an escalator, as opposed to a dedicated room. I think that's a good call it out for our listeners who are just starting their journey. You know, we, we can't make everything accessible all the time to every person, but we have to start somewhere and just getting started on your journey to disability inclusion is often, it's not only a gesture of goodwill that creates loyalty, it's just the right thing to do. And if it isn't perfect, it's still useful to a lot of us. So I appreciate the effort that you all are making. And I encourage others to get started. You've recently launched a program it's called Social Stories. Is that right?

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

Yeah. I'm happy to share more about that. So basically Social Stories are widely used in the autism community as a preparation tool. So it's something that can be reviewed prior to an upcoming social situation like traveling and going to an airport. So typically they have a lot of simple sentences, large photos that will really demonstrate what the upcoming activity is going to be. And so for us this past fall, we just recognize the travel experience has dramatically changed. It just, it has. And there's also been some national news stories about the challenges of young travelers with autism, as far as being able to fully follow some of the mask mandates. So, we elected to create a social story a year earlier than what we had intended to really create a document that people could review prior to coming to the airport that would show you what it's like to be at the airport now during COVID. And I'm really pleased with the final result it's available on our website as well as on our app. And I encourage anyone who would think that it would be beneficial for them to check it out prior to traveling within the airport. And our hope is to build upon this. So this is the start and we want to add other resources to our website to really improve and I guess elevate again, our pre-travel resources for our travelers, certainly those with autism, but others who might find it beneficial as well.

**Josh Loebner:**

I understand that you were one of the first in the nation from an airport perspective to have certain disability inclusive elements. Where do you go to find out the information to bring back, to say, "Hey, this is, this needs to be a mandate. This needs to be a goal within our strategic plan for more accessible travel."

**Heather Karch:**

In regards to the Sunflower Lanyard program. You know, I first learned about that actually at a conference the UAIA conference that Opened Doors organizes. I was part of a panel. That conference did lead me to say, "Okay, we really need to consolidate some of our accessibility

information." It's really about kind of the connections between different groups and like educational opportunities, at least for me. Attending webinars, going to conferences and having that open mindset of not being closed minded about, "Can we do this?" And seeing it more of like, "How can we do this?" Instead of saying, "Oh, that would never work here." And that's kind of how I have stayed in touch with things. And it's just those connections between people and paying attention to what other people are doing and seeing if there's a way we can do it too.

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

I would just add on being very mindful about listening to our customers, to hearing what they're saying as well. An example I have is early on, some feedback we heard about the Sunflower Lanyard was it was difficult to get a lanyard if you were already post security because at the time, we only had them available at the main info desk. That made me realize we need to expand where they're available. So really just being mindful, listening to the customers, what are the themes? What are areas for improvement? What are they liking? What's going well? What can we build upon?

**Heather Karch:**

One of the ways that we're really listening now is with our accessibility advisory committee, which is a group of both Port of Seattle staff and also external stakeholders that represent a range of different disabilities, where we can have these really focused conversations and ask these questions of what is it that you'd like to see and what's more important than other things? I'd be remiss if I didn't bring up that we did hire Open Doors in 2017 to do an accessibility evaluation of our airport as part of really a push from our commissioners to be the most accessible airport.

**Toby Willis:**

I'm wondering if you all would share what's the next big thing for SEA? What's on your roadmap or like, what's the next big thing in accessible travel?

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

I would say what's on my roadmap is really to build upon the success of our Wings for Autism Program. At SEA, it is led by arc of King County and conjunction with Alaska Airlines. And it's basically once a year, sometimes twice a year, they offer a chance for families to do a rehearsal, a practice run of coming to the airport. So families sign up in advance and they go through many components of the travel journey. So they go to ticketing counter, they go through TSA, they check in and board their plane, taxi, and then de-board. And it's really successful. And my hope is in the coming year and years would be to build upon that and have a rehearsal like program that's probably scaled a little differently, but offered more regularly as well as open to a broader audience beyond just travelers with autism.

**Heather Karch:**

Yeah. And on my side, I would say that we're just going to continue to chip away. We have multiple facility updates that we're working on, but one thing we'll be able to see is that our curb sides will be updated in the next few years. We are increasing the number of curb cuts for our passengers with reduced mobility on our upper level. And then on the lower level, we're actually going to a zero curb situation, which I think is great with the required pull-outs, you're going to see an increase in bollards as well from a security perspective, but that's all happening in the next few years. And then the last thing I would mention, we went through a really large effort of

looking at our signage at a really holistic, comprehensive level. And we have big plans for updating signage throughout the airport.

**Toby Willis:**

That is so amazing to hear all of these objectives. And what would you say to other airport management teams or individuals who work at airports who are listening to this podcast as to what could be some of those first steps for them to start to gain some of the momentum you both are already a really a part of?

**Heather Karch:**

I would just start with saying every effort makes a difference and that don't be afraid to start and to reach out to others for help. So many people are willing to help and not just within the aviation community. I think there's a lot of opportunities out there for airports that may not feel like they have the resources available. There's ways to do these different efforts, maybe at different scales or with the help of even outside groups. So reaching out to your local community. We have a relationship with MSP and some of the feedback we've heard is that sometimes it's just engaging those outside groups, whether they're disability organizations or other businesses. That ball starts rolling and then it's not even an effort as much anymore because people want to come to you and want to help.

**Toby Willis:**

Chelsea and Heather has been such a pleasure to have you all on the show and representing Seattle and SEA airport, one of the most accessible airports in the nation. It's been a pleasure to talk to you both and hear about this wonderful work that you're doing. Before we go, would you share with us where our listeners can find out more about SEA airport and the accessibility and disability inclusion efforts that you all have underway?

**Chelsea Rodriguez:**

Yeah, absolutely. I encourage everybody to check out our website, so to go to flySEA.org and go to the accessibility section. We also have our fly SEA app as well, which I mentioned was recently expanded to greater highlight accessibility. And also, I would say for anybody that's a passenger in the near future, our customer service communication team is incredibly responsive. So you're welcome to email, phone, and then also this last Fall, we just unveiled a new text feature. So people during business hours could even text our customer communication team.

**Josh Loebner:**

Heather, Chelsea, Toby, this has been an amazing conversation. SEA airport is definitely now on my bucket list. To everybody listening, hopefully you can check out SEA or at the airport that you frequent, hopefully it can become more accessible. This has been an Explorable podcast and we'll hopefully hear you next time. Thank you so much.