

Welcome back to the March edition of Kids Crusaders Corner. This month I will wrap up the last of my 3 part story that began in January regarding a solo trip that I took my son Nick on for his 16th birthday. (If you haven't read the first two parts, please do, as it will help to make the story complete.)

Our adventures with traveling solo through Disney were truly that, adventures. In the first 2 articles you could see that we encountered a few obstacles that were "breathtaking" in a special sort of way and a lot of memorable events that occurred which, with no doubt in my mind, makes Disney the Magical place where dreams really do come true.

In last month's article, I explained how the cast members at the Crystal Palace restaurant made Nick's 16th birthday so unforgettable by giving him a life-sized stuffed animal Mickey Mouse (which I had to creatively find ways to navigate both my son in a wheelchair and this over-sized plush Mickey through the remainder of our day at the Magic Kingdom and back to the hotel.)

And just when you thought the fun had stopped since we were to be flying back home the next day, it had just begun all over again. Disney was absolutely amazing at making sure I had all of the help I needed getting our luggage, Nick with his custom wheelchair, the life sized "mouse" and myself to the airport the next day. Once at the airport, we checked our luggage at the JetBlue terminal counter. This left me somewhat free to once again navigate Nick through crowds with a very large mouse strapped to the front of his wheelchair. As clumsy as this sounded, I felt great pride in the fact that despite a few minor hiccups during our trip, it was an overall success and Nick had an amazing time.

The actual "fun" started when we had to go through the airport security checkpoint. Since Nick is non-ambulatory, he is always taken to a special spot in his wheelchair where he is "inspected", while I go through the standard "empty all of your pockets, take off your shoes, place all bags on the x-ray conveyor belt" routine. I passed through that rather quickly and joined Nick to watch the somewhat comical routine that we always go through with the TSA agents when they try to "wand" him down. The wand always beeps. Always. Perhaps someday they will realize he is sitting in a metal framed wheelchair. And they are usually

pretty good about giving up after changing out the wand 4 or 5 times before they are convinced that it is really just the wheelchair causing the “beeps”.

This particular time was different. Nick absolutely refused to let go of his birthday gift from Disney. A few of the TSA agents had tried to take Mickey away from Nick to place it through the x-ray scanner. This of course resulted in Nick becoming visibly upset, kicking and flailing his legs, making a lot of noise and drawing a lot of attention to where we were. I explained to the agents that because of Nick’s disability, he often has a difficult time with change. And even after I tried to explain to Nick that Mickey was just going through the machine to “have his picture taken” it was still a definite “no” in Nick’s mind. I explained multiple times that this was a gift from Disney to my son for his birthday and asked if they could just use the wand on the mouse instead of making my son more distraught. After waiting for an additional 30 minutes, we had someone from the TSA (I assumed it was a manager) come over to talk to Nick again. Nick was not changing his mind. After much debate about what to do about the mouse, TSA agreed to use the “wand” on the mouse so that it wouldn’t leave Nick’s possession. But of course, because the mouse was so big, there were metal pieces in the ears to keep them formed and upright, which in turn caused Mickey to beep non-stop. Now we have the full attention of the TSA. I tried taking pictures but was asked to put my camera away. How many people would one assume that it would take to hand frisk a stuffed mouse? The answer? Too many. It was obvious to everyone that this was just a very large stuffed animal. That beeped. With the use of multiple wands. And it beeped in the same exact spot every single time. The ears!

Growing tired of this excitement, I once again explained and demonstrated how the ears could be moved into different positions (because of the metal wires inside). I was asked to sit down and let them “do their jobs”. I sat in a chair nearby as I watched at least 4 TSA agents discussing how they should proceed. Confiscating Mickey was not going to be an option (at least not in my book). Out of sheer frustration I said (what I thought was under my breath) “I highly doubt Disney packed Mickey with any explosive devices”....oops. Note to self and others, think it but please do not actually SAY IT. Another hour before the questioning stopped. I had even taken my camera out to show them the pictures of when the mouse was actually given to Nick during dinner at the Crystal Palace. I think it was after

seeing the pictures, and truly not knowing how to handle this that they either felt we were no longer a threat or they were tired of dealing with me.

So we cleared security with less than an hour to get to our gate and pre-board. Once again, we flew JetBlue (I cannot say enough good things about flying with their airline when you need any special assistance.) We were greeted with all smiles as we pre-boarded the plane. Nicks wheelchair gets gate checked at the door of the aircraft so that it will be waiting for us at our next destination. JetBlue had seated us in the very first row (always so helpful) and I tucked Nick into the window seat where he could comfortably lean and keep himself in an upright position. The pilot was super friendly and talking to Nick about his birthday trip and what a special gift Disney had given him. (He had no idea that it was about to get even more special.) I buckled Mickey into the seat next to Nick and then buckled myself into the aisle seat. I laid my head back, thoroughly exhausted as the other passengers were starting to board the aircraft. Nick was so happy to be on the plane, as was I. We were to fly from Orlando into New York at the JFK airport. Once we were to land there, I was going to have to transfer Nick back into his wheelchair and change flights 2 gates down that would take us to our final destination, Rochester. I knew this, but also knew I had a couple of hours to nap and regain some strength before having to do all that.

As the plane was filling to capacity, the pilot came out and asked if he could talk to me. Nick was already starting to fall asleep leaned up against the window, clutching Mickey Mouse. The pilot explained that the flight we were on going into New York was a sold out flight, meaning Mickey could not stay strapped in the seat next to Nick. At this point I felt my eyes filling up with tears as I explained the horror we had endured at the security checkpoint and how important this was to Nick. The pilot came out and talked to Nick himself. He asked if we could “let Mickey sleep right above his head where the jackets and pillows were.” Nicks said no. But then when I asked and said Mickey would sleep better there until we got home he said yes. Finally. The problem escalated when Mickey, no matter how much we squished him, would not fit into the overhead compartment. The pilot asked me about gate checking him with the wheelchair. That was not an option since we had promised Nick that once the airplane was up in the air he could have Mickey back in his lap.

So, while the rest of the passengers had buckled in, and listened to the pre-flight safety instructions, the pilot and I were still trying to figure out what to do with the mouse. The pilot asked Nick if it would be ok if Mickey helped him fly the plane. Nick thought this was funny and said yes. Relief. We got the mouse into the cockpit; I snapped a quick picture of him in the pilots chair and then went back to my seat. The pilot said they had a “jump-seat” in the cockpit that he could secure him in there. I should mention this was a late flight from Orlando into New York and we were already 40 minutes delayed because of the mouse dilemma.

With the cabin door shut, and every seat on the plane full (with the exception of one single seat at the very back of the aircraft) we were finally able to take off. Before the plane had even pushed away from the gate, the pilot made an overhead announcement that he was sorry for the delay but that we would be leaving shortly and assured everyone that connecting flights were aware of “our” delay and that nobody would miss connecting flights. I was now buckled in next to Nick and there was a woman reading her book in the aisle seat where I had originally sat. She seemed totally oblivious as to anything that had been going on, engrossed in her book.

I knew there was a problem when the pilot reappeared to speak to me again. Apparently the mouse was too big in the cockpit and was in the way of some of their controls. He did tell me there was one single seat at the very back of the aircraft and he was going to attempt to have the flight attendant take Mickey back there and strap him in without Nick seeing. Fail. He saw and then his world fell apart. He cried and was kicking the wall in front of him while repeatedly saying “Mickey, Mickey”. Everyone was so tired at this point and it seemed like we had run out of options when the engrossed book lady looked up and asked if there “was a problem”. Yeah, just a slight one. So I explained to her what she had obviously not paid any attention to for the previous 40 minutes. I buckled Mickey into the seat next to Nick, which made him much happier and told the pilot I would take the seat at the back of the aircraft. I just asked that the flight crew come to get me immediately if Nick needed anything or seemed upset.

The pilot preferred I didn’t do that, but options were not plentiful at this point. “Book lady” had resumed her reading and as I went to pass by her I politely asked her to alert the flight crew if she thought my son needed me. She asked where I

was going (again she had missed another important part of why we were delayed) and she nonchalantly said, “Would it be easier for everyone if I just took the seat in the back? I don’t mind. I’m traveling alone and just want to read.”

The pilot thanked her as did every passenger on the aircraft. I kept saying how sorry I was, but the pilot was so nice. He said “don’t worry about it. Everything has a way of working out.”

We finally arrived in New York well after midnight. Nick was sound asleep against the window with his mouse. I sat quietly and watched all of the passengers get off the plane for connecting flights. Knowing that we would be the last to get off the plane, I just waited. The pilot was thanking everyone for their patience and saying whatever pilots say as people leave. I was just way too tired to care. His wheelchair was waiting outside the cabin door when the pilot looked over and saw it. He looked at Nick sound asleep and said “oh, I forgot all about Nick. Don’t wake him just yet. Where are you flying to?” I told him Rochester, but our connecting flight was 2 terminals down. The plane we were currently on was heading towards Syracuse. He told me to let Nick sleep while he made a quick phone call. He came back and said that he just changed flight plans with the other aircraft. He decided to let Nick sleep and he would fly our plane into Rochester and the other plane that we were supposed to take would switch and fly passengers into Syracuse. I looked at him and wiped my tears away as I thanked him. He said it wasn’t a problem since neither one of them was from this area and a hotel to them was just a hotel. He said it was an easy enough switch. I asked him about the 50 passengers that had already made their way to the connecting Rochester flight. He said they were being sent back to our aircraft. I sat in the seat waiting for 50 angry passengers to return. Instead, as people re-boarded the aircraft their faces softened as they saw Nick sleeping soundly with his friend Mickey (now fully understanding the wheelchair at the gate belonged to him.) My faith in humanity restored.

Nick slept peacefully for the short flight from JFK to Rochester. We arrived after 2 am due to all of the mouse delays and people shuffling. We were the last ones off the plane as I carried a very heavy sleeping Nick and placed him in his wheelchair.

I hugged the pilot and said I cannot thank you enough for everything. He smiled and again said it was really no problem at all.

It was not a problem at all until we went to collect our luggage. During the pilots agreeing to swap flights, they had not informed the ground crew, so here 52 of us stood waiting for our luggage that was not showing up. The luggage on the conveyor belt was the entire luggage for the people traveling to Syracuse, which meant everyone's luggage for Rochester, went to Syracuse instead. When someone had finally figured it out, I felt as if I had 100 eyeballs all looking in my direction. I kept apologizing to everyone and out of the 50 people, everyone said not to worry about it. Only one business class passenger seemed to be really upset. We all had to fill out lost luggage reports which took another hour, but JetBlue assured everyone their luggage would be personally delivered to them by 3pm the next day and everyone was given a \$75.00 credit voucher for their airlines for the inconvenience.

Just one of the many reasons I always pick JetBlue as my first choice for air travel.

We made it home and were tucked into bed by 4:30 am. Nick with Mickey tucked safely in bed next to him and my last recollection was collapsing on my bed just trying to piece together the series of crazy but incredible moments from a trip that made memories to last a lifetime.

So, thank you Disney for making Nick's 16th birthday a year he will never forget. And a huge shout out thank you to the entire staff of JetBlue for going above and beyond to make my transition home as easy as possible.

That wraps up our incredible Disney adventure. Again, if anyone has any questions about Disney travel, feel free to contact me at Julie.kidscrusaders@gmail.com . I'm not a travel agent, just a well-seasoned traveler that can give you some of the ins and outs of navigating Disney, or airports!

Until next month, in closing, I would like to share a favorite quote that applies to this entire journey that we are on (not just our Disney trip.)

“Carry out a random act of kindness, with no expectation of reward, safe in the knowledge that one day someone might do the same for you.” (Princess Diana)

Peace, love and happiness. You are never alone on your journey!

Julie