

Happy New Year everyone! We are off to a chilly start here in upstate New York with temperatures hovering at -8 degrees (not counting the wind chills). So to warm things up a little, I thought I would share with you a special memory that I have from warmer climates.

When my son Nick turned 16 years old, I surprised him with a trip to Disney for 3 nights and 4 days. This was a “mom and me” trip (which I continued the tradition for my other 2 kids when they turned 16 as well, only they chose New York City!) It took me 7 hours to assemble and hand pipe frost the JetBlue airplane cake (with the help of my husband) which we used to surprise Nick with at his party. (I almost wanted to cry when it came time to serve the cake, as cousins were requesting a wing; someone wanted the cockpit, and then the tail piece. It was twisted humor when my husband yelled out to the remaining adults still unserved, “ok, who wants some of the fuselage?”)

So, 2 weeks after the party, Nick and I were on our way to do Disney. Everyone thought I was insane for attempting a trip like this solo, and I have to admit there were a few times during the trip where I questioned my sanity as well. But looking back, despite some of the little (and somewhat potential major) situations we encountered, I wouldn't trade a minute of it for the memories that we made.

We arrived in Orlando and boarded one of Disney's transportation buses to our hotel. I figured with traveling alone it would be best to stay on Disney property and not rent a vehicle. From the beginning phases of planning this trip, all the way throughout the trip and even a follow up phone call upon our return, I have to say that Disney pulled out all stops to make this trip not only Magical for us but also relatively easy to execute.

The “cast member” that assisted me with my hotel reservations suggested that we stay at The Pop Century Resort because it was the last bus stop in the transportation line prior to getting to the Magic Kingdom and there was also a separate bus line from the hotel that went directly to Downtown Disney. This was extremely helpful because it decreased a lot of wait time of stopping at multiple hotels to pick up other guests. She also made sure that we had a first floor room

with outside door access which was close to both the lobby and the swimming pool.

I let Nick choose which Disney theme park he wanted to go to and he chose the Magic Kingdom. We spent the first day resting and just getting acquainted with the hotel grounds, the pool, and planning our day at the park. We had been to Disney before, many times as a family, but this would be the true test of their “magic”. Traveling alone with a child in a wheelchair, having to do single person transfers when on a good day it required two, and navigating the crowds, attractions and meals unassisted, became almost a personal mission. I was determined that this was going to be the birthday of all birthdays to remember. And Disney, true to their reputation, made it beyond “magical.”

We arrived and made our way down Main Street, heading towards the castle. I knew which rides and attractions would be Nick’s favorites so I had mapped out our day accordingly. (Keep in mind that this trip was almost 8 years ago. At the time, Disney was still utilizing the Guest Assistance Card for people that requested it upon entrance to the park for easier access to rides/attractions due to a disability. This truly made my solo trip with Nick extremely easy, and I’m grateful that it was available when we traveled. They have subsequently changed over to a new system known as the DAS, or Disability Access Service Card. I cannot compare the differences between the two as I have not returned since the new system was put into place. “The DAS Card is designed accommodate guests who aren’t able to wait in a conventional queue environment due to a disability (including non-apparent disabilities). A DAS Card will be issued at Guest Relations main entrance locations and will offer guests a return time for attractions based on the current wait time. As soon as the Guest finishes one attraction, they can receive a return time for another.” In contrast, the older system that we used allowed us to access each attraction as we got to it, without the wait time, often using the Fast Pass entrances or sometimes alternate entrances that would easily accommodate the wheelchair. The older system worked great for us because Nick has difficulty tolerating crowds and excessive heat. I will add that, sadly enough, I witnessed firsthand people abusing this system, which was part of what prompted Disney to change their policy.)

So, the first few minutes I had to negotiate with Nick about a certain attraction, Pirates of the Caribbean. They had just redone this attraction to include a cameo of Johnny Depp and I really wanted to go on it. Nick really didn't, but after I promised him everything in Disney I could think of, he agreed. This attraction is a boat ride that takes you through different pirate scenes. It was the first challenge of the day because it required me to transfer Nick out of his wheelchair and place him down into a boat and then get in next to him and fully support him during the ride. The cast members informed me the ride ended in a different location and that they would make sure his wheelchair was waiting at the exit of the ride, which it was. They also informed me it was a "timed" exit and there were no cast members at the exit. Basically what that meant to me was that once the boat stopped, you had a set amount of time to exit before it would begin moving again. The ride came to a stop and his wheelchair was exactly where they said it would be. We were seated alone in the last row of the boat. All of the other rows exited fairly quickly but I knew I still had time. I got out of the boat and reached in to pull Nick up and out onto the wooden planks. I began pulling him but soon noticed he wasn't moving. His foot was stuck under the seat in front of where we had been sitting. Knowing my time was running out I tried reasoning with Nick to turn his foot so I could get him out. This just caused him to tense up more. It was at that very moment the time was up and the boat started to slowly move forward. I glanced ahead and took note that I had 4 handrails I had to hurdle over and about 4 feet of extra plank before I would hit water. I frantically jumped each rail while he continued to laugh and get further wedged. His laughter must have caught the attention of the guy that had been in the seat in front of us, because out of nowhere he appeared and launched himself back into the moving boat, as I continued to clear hurdles, and dislodged Nick's foot. I had just cleared the last hurdle handrail when he yelled to me, "I've got him, now what?" I yelled back "Either duck or jump!!!" (because the boat was to circle back around but under a WALL). He opted to jump. He jumped off the back of the boat just as it left the unloading area with Nick safely in his arms. However, the impact of him landing on the plank deck with Nick in his arms caused him to crash into me. I fell, he fell with Nick who landed on top of me and he was on top of Nick. My right arm was IN THE WATER. Nick was laughing so hard it actually sounded like he was

screaming in pain, which was causing me to just lay there and laugh and our poor stranger superman was on top of Nick not really knowing what he should do. So he asked me, “now what?” I said “whatever you do, do it slowly. Do NOT roll to the right because we will all be swimming and whatever you do watch out because the next boat is coming. “We opted to lay in our human sandwich pile until the next boat came to a stop. I can only imagine what the people on that boat must have been thinking when they saw this. Some offered to help, but the fear was with any additional help, we would still end up in the water. So I simply, through tears of hysterical laughter said “No thanks, we’ve got this. You have to pay extra for this attraction so keep moving please.” This caused my personal superman to laugh. Once that crowd cleared out, we carefully rolled to the left, one at a time. The 3 of us lay on the floor still laughing, because seriously, what else could we do? We finally managed to collect our silly selves and get Nick up off the floor and buckled back in his wheelchair. “Superman” asked me if I was ok and asked if I was traveling alone with Nick. After explaining that I was, he kindly offered to have us join his group and do the park together so that I would have help. As kind as that was, I declined, because the whole idea of traveling with Nick alone was the “adventure”. And the adventure had just begun!!

And just as you can’t cover all of Disney in one day, I cannot even begin to do justice to this adventure in just one article....so please stay tuned until next month when I will continue to share all of the “magic” that we experienced.

If anyone has any questions about traveling to Disney, I would be glad to try to answer them. You can contact me at Julie.kidscrusaders@gmail.com