

Michele Erwin

Founder and President of All Wheels Up

*Interview conducted by
Carla Aguilar
On April 16, 2018 in Arlington, Texas*

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Biography

Michele Erwin was born in Long Island, New York in 1974. She was raised in New York and has a twin sister and younger brother. After high school she followed her passion in fashion and attended the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. She has worked for notable fashion houses, such as Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, and Ralph Lauren. She currently works for the corporate offices of JCPenney in Plano, Texas as a sourcing business manager.

Michele is married and has two kids with her husband. Her journey into the disability rights movement began with her son Greyson, who was born in 2007 with a neuro muscular illness called spinal muscular atrophy. Sometime in 2011, Michele and her family were traveling by plane and that was when she began to see her own struggles as well as the struggles that others with electric wheelchairs face when traveling on airplanes. That same year she founded All Wheels Up, an advocacy and research organization that advocates for wheelchair accessible air travel and crash tests wheelchairs for commercial flight.

In 2014, Michele and her family moved down to Frisco, Texas. She has continued to work full-time at JCPenney and runs All Wheels Up from her home and through their website as the founder and president. She hopes to continue the current advocacy and research roles of the organization while also branching out towards humanitarian work.

Topics discussed

- Brief biography
- Entrance into the disability rights movement

- Wheelchair research
- All Wheels Up
- Moving to Texas
- All Wheels Up's roles
- Working with other organizations
- Presenting at the U.S. Access Board
- Working with airlines
- Foreign help
- Running All Wheels Up
- Funding All Wheels Up
- Humanitarian efforts

Aguilar

Okay, so this is Carla Aguilar interviewing Michele Erwin for the UT Arlington Texas Disability History Project, today's date is April 16, 2018 and I am at the Science and Engineering Library at UTA in Arlington, Texas. I am here today to talk with Michele about her activism in the disability rights movement with a focus on the organization All Wheels Up. Thank you for participating in the University's oral history program Michele.

Erwin

Absolutely, I'm really excited. Thank you.

Aguilar

Alright, so if you're ready to begin I think...I think I'm going to ask first a few biographical information. So, when and where were you born?

Erwin

<topic>Brief biography</topic>

I was born in New York on Long Island in 1974.

Aguilar

Do you have any family or siblings? Or anything like that?

Erwin

I have a twin sister, yes, it's exciting. I have a younger brother, and my dad. They all live in New York still. And my mom moved to Texas to be with me.

Aguilar

Oh, that's so nice. I think I did see your twin sister on your website on All Wheels Up. I just wasn't sure because I'm really bad at telling when people look alike so I was like I think, I think they're related.

Erwin

Yeah, and she is a founding board member of All Wheels Up.

Aguilar

Okay, so a little more of like your early life. If you went to college or any secondary schools or beginning career moves that you think would be important to mention?

Erwin

Interestingly enough I did not start my career in the disability area. I actually had a passion for fashion. I went to the Fashion Institute of Technology. I had a wonderful career in the fashion industry and actually still do. I have worked for some notable fashion houses, such as Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, and now with working in Texas I work for JCPenney's, which is in the corporate office as a sourcing business manager. When the designers are done creating their vision, I am the person that helps execute it at the factory level.

Aguilar

Funny thing is I used to work for JCPenney. I worked there during my undergrad and I loved it. So, how exactly did your career move go from fashion, even though it still is, but how did you end up going towards the disability rights movement?

Erwin

<topic>Entrance into the disability rights movement</topic>

So, I am married, and I have a lovely husband and we embarked on having a family. So, we had a son in 2007 and his name is Greyson and he was diagnosed shortly after birth with a neuro muscular illness similar to ALS which, and I always reference ALS because it's well-known, it's Lou Gehrig's disease, well they called this baby Lou Gehrig's disease and it's called spinal muscular atrophy. My husband and I are very active in the spinal muscular atrophy community. He, my husband, is a national board member and when we were in New York I was a board member in the New York chapter and at one time acting president. When I moved here to Texas there wasn't a chapter, so I created a chapter. So, it just gives you a little bit idea of how I got involved in disability.

But in 2011 when my son was young, he was probably three or four we took one of our first flights with his wheelchair. And even though he was really little, and I could still carry him onto the airplane, just as if you would carry any other four-year-old, we were also struggling to have to maneuver the wheel chair and pack the wheelchair. He had to...he's completely floppy so he had special seating and had to do all of this and I was just overwhelmed with this prospect of what would air travel be like down the road for us? I just felt like it was going to be too difficult, too unsafe and I couldn't imagine how people do this as adults. I just thought well why, why can't somebody who uses a wheelchair just lock down their wheelchair on an airplane like they do in a minivan or a bus?

Erwin

<topic>Wheelchair research</topic>

After I got back from that trip from Chicago I just started googling, you know, is anybody out there? Is this, you know researching this? Is this an opportunity? Is it just done on planes that I'm not on? What's the prospect on this and realized that nobody had even like...there was nothing about it on the internet anywhere. I just started doing even more research and just started contacting people and I contacted the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration). I think I contacted the FAA for a month and until somebody actually would not hang up on me and they gave me, they directed me to their director of R and D [Research and Development] and he said that I was the very first person to ever ask if there could be a wheelchair spot on airplanes. I thought that was really interesting.

I just want to circle back. I did do some research and found out wheelchair tie down systems had surpassed a 20G crash test and so then I looked up what does an airplane seat crash test at and its 16G but that's only as of 2008. Before 2008 airplane seats that we all sit in only passed 8Gs so it gives you an idea of the difference and even in airplanes that we area probably even sitting in today. Those seats that are older are only crash tested at 8Gs. So, I contacted the organization Q'Straint and I asked them if we could partner together and so we...they said that they wouldn't be taking on this initiative on their own, but they would completely help me in any other way they could in my endeavor for accessible air travel. We have had a contract and been working together for the last seven years and they have been true to their word from day one. They said if I ever needed their facilities, if I ever needed tie-downs for crash testing, anything they would do it and they have stepped up for everything and anything I have ever asked for. They donated restraints for the our very first crash test in 2016 and we are having our very first research working group session on May 10 and they are opening up their facilities in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. People from all over the world are flying to see our feasibility study as well to discuss the future of research for a wheelchair spot.

Aguilar

And just to clarify, what's Q'Straint? The...

Erwin

Oh, I'm sorry...

Aguilar

No, you're good.

Erwin

Q'Straint is the leading manufacturer of wheelchair tie-downs in the world. So, they make the wheelchair tie-down systems that we all see on metro buses across the United States. At Disneyland parks, on every Disneyland bus, and every school bus. If you have your own personal minivan, they are also in your own personal vehicle to tie down your wheelchair.

Aguilar

Okay, and how did you come across them? Was it just like researching and then you found out about them?

Erwin

So, my son...we have a wheelchair van and I am familiar with the tie-down systems and that's why I had called them and asked if there was any work being done on accessible air travel and they had said no and...that's just how we became partners and working on this.

Aguilar

Interesting.

Erwin

They're happy to let me do the work. (laughs)

Aguilar

Is there...when you reach out to them is there a distinct, I guess distinct location here in Texas? Or is it out of state? I know you said they're letting you borrow the facility in Florida.

Erwin

Yeah, no they are only in Florida here in the United States. They have other facilities around the world. They have an office and research facility also in the U.K. and they have another I believe manufacturing and offices in Australia.

Aguilar

Oh okay.

Erwin

But they are definitely a global organization to make sure that they can accommodate everybody's needs globally.

Aguilar

Well that's interesting.

Erwin

Yeah right.

Aguilar

Okay so when you were first creating and founding All Wheels Up, was it just you or was it other members?

Erwin

<topic>All Wheels Up</topic>

Yes, so we started, or I started in 2011 and yes it was just me and originally, I was really just advocating for someone else to do the research. I basically was the liaison between Q'Straint and the FAA. And after a year the FAA had said you know we really believe in this project, we think this is really interesting that wheelchair tie-down systems already surpass a 20G crash test but while we have money in our R and D budget we, the gentleman I was working with his name was Rick Duise said that he could not get any funding released to do this testing. So, he suggested to me to go to congress and have the money released or to lobby the airlines to lobby congress to have the money released. Both of which seemed completely overwhelming and at that time I was not interested in taking anything to Washington. I just felt like that was going to be like moving a really big mountain and just nearly impossible. So, that's when All Wheels Up went from becoming an advocacy group and trying to advocate for a wheelchair spot to we became a research organization and raising funds to do our own research and our own crash testing of wheelchair tie-down systems for commercial flights.

And it took just to get our 501 C number it took us over a year. We were denied several times. I actually, we started in New York believe it or not because I was from New York. We only moved, my family and I to Texas four years ago. We, I actually ended up calling our senator and asked for help and he helped move along the paperwork and he agreed that there was really no reason for a hold up. You know, sometimes when you create a non-profit you have to prove that the area isn't inundated with like organizations which I found that really interesting because there's so many of the same organizations, but for some reason they pushed back. They didn't feel like we were an appropriate organization and then we just kept pushing forward and actually our senator back in New York, our house representative helped get us approved as a nonprofit. So, I did contact congress a little bit (both laugh) for their help. That was exciting that somebody also saw and believed in the work that we were doing.

Then we applied or I applied for our first FAA grant in 2012. Unfortunately doing a very big government grant takes an extensive period of time and it could be very much a full-time job in just doing these grants and unfortunately, we were denied. The same month that we got that denial my family lost our house in Hurricane Sandy in New York, so I actually needed to take a little hiatus from All Wheels Up to rebuild our home because our family was displaced. We were not living at home anymore so All Wheels Up definitely took a back burner for probably a year, so we could basically put our home and our lives back together.

Aguilar

Wow that must have been so rough, I'm so sorry.

Erwin

Oh yeah, thank you. Yeah, I have...it's interesting...my, we have, I said my son has an illness and it is a terminal illness and it's really interesting my husband said getting through Hurricane Sandy was harder than the diagnosis of our son. You know I think it's just when you're going through certain thing they're just so awful and losing everything that you own was definitely pretty...We lost our cars, we lost

everything in our home. I think it was just and you had to rebuild your home and you're having to fight insurance and all of that stuff, so he found it to be more traumatic.

Aguilar

They make you jump over more holes...

Erwin

Yes, exactly. So, to get back unless you had any other questions?

Aguilar

Yeah, actually about that...when, were you guys still in New York when Hurricane Sandy hit?

Erwin

Yes.

Aguilar

Or had you guys evacuated by then?

Erwin

No, we were in New York when it happened, and we were while we were close to the water, we were not in an area that needed to evacuate. We actually had some other, another family with us because they had evacuated so it was one of those just surprises. We've never had water in our area before so and then it was just one of those things where the water came so quickly, and it would be too unsafe to leave especially with a child who is immobile and in a wheelchair. And our friends who were staying with us actually had an infant, it was too risky, so we just moved to the upper level of the house.

Aguilar

Oh okay. So, to tie it back to a little to All Wheels Up...

Erwin

Oh yeah, sorry.

Aguilar

Oh no you're fine. So, when you were since you founded the organization in New York was it...how was it moving the organization down over here to Texas when you moved?

Erwin

<topic>Moving to Texas</topic>

So legally we actually needed to remain an entity in New York. We're like a dual New York and Texas organization because as a nonprofit you actually have to close your organization and you would have to start all over and reapply for your EIN number and reapply as a nonprofit organization which is thousands of dollars. Then you would have to reincorporate again which is money. And just as a nonprofit I just I fund all of this...up until about 2015 I was funding this all by myself. So out of my own money, there was no way that when I moved to Texas in 2014 that I was going to be looking at to take on the money that I had already invested in 2011 to establish the company to close...Money to close it in New York and money in Texas to reopen it. We have sort of it's a Texas can adopt your sort of thing as a nonprofit sort of and that's what we have done.

Aguilar

Okay.

Erwin

I run the organization out of Texas, but the taxes are done out of New York I believe.

Aguilar

Oh okay.

Erwin

Yeah, it's interesting. I don't really understand it it's a Texas adoption so...

Aguilar

That way you don't officially have to close it down and...

Erwin

Yeah.

Aguilar

Open it again, that would be really hard.

Erwin

Yeah.

Aguilar

So, a little more to focus on All Wheels Up, what exactly does the organization do?

Erwin

<topic>All Wheels Up's roles</topic>

While our...we say we are an advocacy group we raise awareness for a wheelchair spot and how important and vital it is for people who use a wheelchair. We stress that the current way of flying for someone who uses a wheelchair is unsafe. While we agree that it's undignified our primary focus is research and so we only focus on the safety. We don't...there's many advocacy groups out there that advocate for accessible air travel and they take on the advocacy efforts of rights and laws and where we differ is we advocate for safety. That's what our research is all about, our research is about the physical safety of someone who uses a wheelchair and whether they're safest in their wheelchair or whether or not they'd be safer in an airplane seat. Everybody's physical limitations and everybody's physical disability is unique so while we are advocating for a wheelchair spot we're certainly not saying if you use a wheelchair that the only way to fly is in your wheelchair. We're leaving it up to somebody who uses a wheelchair to choose because there are a lot of wheelchair users who want to be able to transfer and sit in the airplane seat. They find that most comfortable and we're happy to let everybody fly in the way that they're comfortable, but we also believe that there's a whole community out there, actually over probably ninety percent, ninety-eight percent of the wheelchair community that doesn't fly because it's so unsafe. We're advocating for them so that they have an opportunity to fly.

Aguilar

I also saw that as I was looking through the website for All Wheels Up I saw that they had some videos and prompts about the wheelchair crash testing?

Erwin

Ah-hum.

Aguilar

When you guys put up those videos do you get like immediate responses back? Or is it, are the videos based off people's wants and responses and what they need? Or stuff like that? Or is kind of just what you guys think of during your meetings and stuff?

Erwin

It's really interesting in 2014 I online met Alan, Alan Chaulet, who is now our VP of Communication. He had an organization, just a Facebook organization called We Want Accessible Airplanes. What's interesting is somebody, another person found him and they had a petition and her name was Vicky Trainor, so the three or four because there was another gentleman as part of the accessible flights Facebook page. I reached out to all of them and said hey you know I have this nonprofit and I've already funded the nonprofit and you have not...one organization is just a Facebook page where they did an excellent job with the social media And they had done a great job at the social media aspect of things

where I was that's where I was struggling and I...Vicky Trainor was very comfortable with law and she had created a petition so we ended up working all together and then everybody came under All Wheels Up and so we basically created this organization. Well All Wheels Up was already created but then we were a bigger organization of now people, not just me working for accessible air travel.

Then we decided we needed to let everybody know what we meant by a wheelchair spot. We would get a lot of communication on our Facebook page or Twitter; we don't understand your project. We started, we're always raising money, we raised enough money for an animation, and we were really lucky to get an animator who worked for Nike, but it was also amazing. He's done some other aviation projects, so he really got it with limited, actually input from us. Like we told him what we wanted but we actually didn't need to have him circle back and edit anything on his animation and that was really exciting. After we posted that animation that you do see on our website that was a huge ah-huh moment for the entire wheelchair community or the disability community.

We posted that to Facebook and very quickly we had over 300 views of that animation just on our Facebook page. That's not saying you know how many times that animation has been seen on our website or Twitter pages or how many other times that has been shared. That has really propelled our organization out there and has really brought the conversation about what does accessible air travel or what could accessible air travel look like. That was, is a huge factor to our success and we're hoping with additional funding that for every question that say manufacturers have, or the disability community has or the airlines have that we can actually put it in animation form because it truly has been able to answer a lot of questions.

Aguilar

It's a lot easier to show it than try to explain because even as I was looking through your website and I saw your Twitter page and everything it seemed like people we're getting it better when they would see the actual animation. It just it clicked more.

Erwin

Exactly, yeah.

Aguilar

That actually kind of leads to, you were talking about the other organization We Want Accessible Airplanes, I actually want to know does All Wheels Up work with other organizations as well?

Erwin

<topic>Working with other organizations</topic>

Absolutely, while we say spear-headed this...since 2011 where we were the only one's walking down this road and then I was lucky enough to find these other people in 2014. After we posted this animation, 2016 became a huge year for us and now we are working with another advocacy group in the U.K. called Flying Disabled, they're more of an advocacy group to raise awareness for a wheelchair spot but we really do work very closely with them and they're definitely our partners in reaching out to people globally. Here in the United States we do work with larger organizations like the Paralyzed Veterans of America, the Muscular Dystrophy Association, they've actually asked us to fly into Washington, D.C. last year and be a part of their advocacy conference and we helped lobby congress regarding accessible air travel, which is a platform that they have recently taken on. We also work with United Spinal, another

very large organization in Washington, D.C., and I think, we know have the support of Wounded Warriors, we've spoken with them. And another organization called Disaster Strategies. Disaster Strategies is a large organization that primarily focuses on people with disabilities and how to basically evacuate them during disaster situations.

Aguilar

That is interesting to know...

Erwin

Yeah.

Aguilar

When you work with them do you like work physically with them? Or is it kind of both communication across the nation and then physical work with them here in Texas? Is it both?

Erwin

It's both. I've traveled to Washington, D.C. a few times to have one-on-one meetings with them. I've met them at, I've presented at the U.S. Access Board Meeting which is a very large organization for all disabilities and the people on the board are nominated by the president and they are primarily people with disabilities or people who are familiar with the disabilities and how the government can help impact. It's everything from the DOT [Department of Transportation] and everybody has kind of like a part in this thing. So, I've presented at the Access Board twice regarding my project and I've interacted with different organizations. They are, I've met organizations one on one in their offices in Washington, D.C. and sometimes I just call them up and say this is I wanted to remind you that we're out here or this is what we've done. You know, I definitely like to keep these organizations just abreast of what we're doing. While they've taken on accessible air travel as a platform not, no one yet has taken on the funding of the research that we are doing. It is you know an interesting relationship you know, like the MDA [Muscular Dystrophy Association] would like us to come out and help advocate on their behalf but we are hoping one day that it will be reciprocated.

Aguilar

So, you mentioned the U.S. Access Meeting...

Erwin

Ah-hum.

Aguilar

Do you mind taking a little about the two times that you said you presented?

Erwin

<topic>Presenting at the U.S. Access Board</topic>

Sure. So, I think in 2016, probably it was July of 2016 I was invited to the U.S. Access Board to present. At that time, we actually hadn't conducted a crash test, but I was actually there just to let the world know that we were actually going to be doing it. The reason I was invited was also in 2016 the FAA Reauthorization Act came to the floor and there is an amendment in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2016 that says they would provide funding for a feasibility study for in-cabin use of wheelchairs, basically a wheelchair spot. I was actually called by the MDA and said that I needed to get into Washington right away and start networking in regard to letting people know what you're doing. You know, like the MDA knew that I was going to be doing a crash test and they knew that I...once this bill hit the floor I needed to start letting people know that there was an organization already out there doing it before say somebody else started maybe getting pitched the idea and somebody who's never even researched the idea.

We are grateful for the MDA getting us to Washington in the first place in 2016. We met with a lot of really just great people on our trip. I think we went on a three-day trip, but we presented to the Access Board and it was the very first time I presented ever, not even in my real career in fashion. It was probably the first time I had ever presented, and they let me know it. They let...they were (laughs) not shy to let me know that All Wheels Up needed a lot of work. It was a little humbling, but it was, I was very, very nervous and I thought I was prepared and I was just letting it all get the best of me. I was speaking in a microphone. I'm speaking in a room of probably 100 people and it was just, it probably was the worst presentation ever, but I do have to say that we have come a long way. (both laugh) Now I am very, very proud of my presentation skills and that huge, huge fumble I don't even really think about it that much. I really don't, now that I present on a regular basis. It's definitely something that you have to practice a lot at and that's really where it comes in from.

Aguilar

Oh, I can only imagine. (laughs) I don't like public speaking.

Erwin

Yeah.

Aguilar

When you went to your Access Board was it just you? Was it just you presenting?

Erwin

Yes, at that time it was just me. I was there in Washington by myself. Yes, the whole when I was making meetings and met everybody by myself. I met with some of our house representatives from Texas just to let them know what I was doing, presented what I would be doing. I still think it was really important to let them know what I would be doing but I have to say I've circled back and been to Washington and actually showed what I did. Showed the feasibility study and the actual crash test, and that definitely raised a lot more eyebrows.

But when I was in Washington the first time in 2016, I also met with the FAA now in person and they were a little surprised by the project. So, after our very first year of working together in 2012, we the FAA and I had never worked together since and then in 2013 we got denied the FAA grant. It wasn't at that time somebody that an organization that I had brought into to say this is what I'm doing. So, we or I met with the FAA and I told them about the idea and then I listened for twenty minutes about why this wasn't going to work and everything that I would need to do to get to the point of doing a wheelchair accessible crash test.

And I said I absolutely agree with you, everything that you have laid out you're absolutely right, and I have done every single one of those points and I am crash testing next month. And she, she said oh, the woman I was meeting with well this is a completely different conversation, and then we actually dove into what testing facility are you using? Do you have the circulars? You know, I was not some crazy mom off the street. I was there to have a true conversation and I showed that I came prepared. I, while my presentation skills weren't too good at the Access Board presentation my, when I'm speaking with just one-on-one with somebody from the FAA and showed them what I had done for the last five years of getting to even just fund a crash test they ten took us very seriously. Then the FAA has been very actively involved in making sure that we have the proper guidance, the proper paperwork, anything that we need. That's been really great and gracious of them as well. Really that's very exciting that the FAA is eager to see us succeed.

Aguilar

You said you also work with congress, airlines, manufacturers...

Erwin

Ah-hum.

Aguilar

How is your relationship with them in terms of All Wheels Up?

Erwin

<topic>Working with airlines</topic>

So now it's great. However, from 2011 till 2016 nobody called me, nobody called me back, nobody wanted to get on the phone. Everybody thinks I'm the crazy lady, and I always say that, and people laugh because people's eyebrows go up when you say I'm conducting research for a wheelchair spot on airplanes. It definitely seems like this far out idea. However, we conducted the very first feasibility study. We conducted crash tests at an FAA facility in September of 2016 and since then the reception from the airlines, the manufacturers, advocacy groups, anybody basically who will listen has been nothing...they are just surprised and where we are in 2018 is now we are having a working group where everybody is flying in from around the world to have conversations about how can we further the research.

I come to the airlines as a completely different approach than any other advocacy group. And the reason that airlines fly to Dallas to meet with me is because one, I'm not shaming, a lot of advocacy groups do that, they shame the airlines into trying to make a change. I'm not going to do that, that's not what we're about. I'm certainly, I'm not an adversarial person so I don't want an adversarial relationship with someone that I'm trying to show my work to. But what I'm trying to do is prove that a wheelchair spot is not just the safest place for someone who may have a severe physical disability but I'm trying to show

the airlines that somebody who has a disability should not be looked at as a loss of revenue but looked at as more income for them. Because someone who is in a wheelchair usually does not fly by themselves. I'm not saying they don't, yes, they do, but if you're looking at someone who they like my child or Stephen Hawkins or Christopher Reeves or Steve Gleeson, these people travel with a team of people just to get them on the plane no less their own family.

You know we'd like to just show the airlines that that ninety-eight percent of the wheelchair community is not flying. It's not just one ticket that they're not selling, its four additional tickets because the parents aren't going to travel to Disney with that child they're going to drive there. If you're a business traveler, you might travel with an aide or you know you might travel with your wife even on a business trip just to help you. Whatever it is, usually someone who has a physical disability travels with someone else and so that's what we're trying to show the airlines is. They shouldn't look at the ticket as a loss of revenue but as gained income.

Also, what we're trying to prove that a wheelchair spot is also economical in the sense that we're trying to do studies to show tarmac turn times. We can prove it's faster for someone who's in a wheelchair to drive down the jetway, get on the airplane, lock themselves in like they are on the bus instead of the entire airplane waiting forty-five minutes for them to get on or off the airplane. I can tell you right now the airlines are like, cannot wait until that paper is done. They want to see how much money that they could possibly save on the tarmac, and that's just one area where we can save them money.

Another area where we save them money is in wheelchair damage. One airline alone can spend up to \$1.5 to \$2.6 million in a year on wheelchair damage alone and we're basically talking about the big power chairs, we're not talking about your manual chairs. We're talking about the PERMA wheelchairs or I'll call them the electric wheelchairs. If we can now say we can primarily get these power wheelchairs onto I don't know any number of airplanes we can save an airline \$2.6 million. There's one airline I know today in 2016 who spent to \$2.6 million, that same airline in 2018 spent \$1 million on wheelchair repairs. In less than eight years that number has more than doubled. In less than five years from now they're going to be looking at spending \$5 million on wheelchair repairs alone. So that is why the airlines are talking to me and I don't mind that that's the reason that they're talking to me because I'm a business person. Yes, I'm a disability activist but I'm also fortunate to come from a business background to understand that sometimes it takes something like this to happen to the airlines to say we need an ah-ha moment and for them to come to us, tell us about your research, what can we do to help you? What can we, you know they've certainly given us guidance and things like that. I would say that my relationship with the airlines has been fantastic.

In 2017 Virgin Atlantic invited me to be their keynote speaker to speak at the very first inaugural Wheelchair for In-Cabin Use Symposium, and that was really exciting. I didn't know what I was going to expect but I was a little disappointed that there...this was in the U.K., so their advocacy is a little different than here in the United States. I was the only organization prepared with actual research and a feasibility study and after that, that really has grown my organization and has really propelled us forward. Since that meeting Virgin Atlantic has asked Airbus for a wheelchair accessible spot on their plane and now Airbus and All Wheels Up are working together. Airbus has now created a project leader for a wheelchair spot, and we are looking All Wheels Up is looking to fly to France to present to Airbus leadership.

Aguilar

When do you guys think you're going to go to France for that one?

Erwin

Uh...

Aguilar

Is that still in the works?

Erwin

That's still in the works, yes. Yeah, but our working, Airbus is flying here to the United States on May 10 to be a part of the conversations for the working group which is just a research dialogue for the airlines to be there for the airplane manufacturers to be there and just have open dialogue and debate and discussion about what it's going to take for a wheelchair spot. And All Wheels Up will be putting the numbers of, we have all of these papers that we want to write or another crash test that we need to do, and this is what it's going to take to do it. This will also hopefully be an opportunity for people in organizations who are stakeholders to step up to the plate and maybe fund some of this research.

Aguilar

That actually kind of went on to the next question that I was going to ask you. If you are like involved with organizations outside of the United States?

Erwin

Yeah! Yeah...

Aguilar

...and that touched the subject on that.

Erwin

<topic>Foreign help</topic>

Yeah, so Flying Disabled is an advocacy group. Airbus is in France. We are involved with the QEF Foundation [Queen Elizabeth's Foundation for Disabled People] they are an organization that can possibly help us with funding, and they're based out of the U.K. They have their own, it's called Tryb4uFly, it's definitely geared more towards people who have autism and say they're uncomfortable in close spaces and so they actually have these mock plane sort of things and you can go inside and kind of get an idea of what it would be like to be in a closed environment with airplane seats and things like that. Or if you don't know if it's the first time you're traveling, and the first time you're paralyzed so you can see what it would be like and how difficult it's going to be to get into an aisle chair and transfer into you know the airplane seat. You're doing it in a safe, quiet location without a lot of people behind you, so you can practice that. It's an interesting...organization.

Aguilar

I think I've heard of that one. I think we had another one of the students in my class for this project I think she interviewed someone who's involved, it's either the same organization or it's an organization just like that here in the United States.

Erwin

Oh, interesting.

Aguilar

I just can't remember what it's called the Tryb4uFly, but I just can't put the name to the organization.

Erwin

Yeah.

Aguilar

You said that All Wheels Up is based, it was first founded in New York, but you had like a dual partnership in Texas.

Erwin

Ah-hum.

Aguilar

Do you have a physical location here in Texas or are is it kind of an organization run from the website and stuff like that if that makes sense?

Erwin

<topic>Running All Wheels Up</topic>

It is basically run from our website. We or I run it from my home. We are nonprofit, nobody gets paid. We are all volunteers. I wish we got paid, for a long time I was not working. I was fortunate not to work and All Wheels Up was my only job and I never got a salary. Alan does not get paid, I would love the opportunity to pay him, he is so good. We've had full time employees, like full time volunteers who this is all they do and it's just something that speaks to them and they give their time but unfortunately, we just don't have that kind of investment yet.

Aguilar

So, the numbers I know you guys said you have volunteers and then you have a vice president and stuff like that, is it an organization that is open to membership? Or kind of...I know you said you're an advocacy group but also a research group?

Erwin

Yeah, it's really interesting because to be part of our organization there is work involved. We have a volunteer who her primary role is just fundraising and she's on the board. And then we started off with just board members because when you have a nonprofit you have to have board. And then Alan came onboard and with Alan came a gentleman named Dennis and he was in the U.K., so he was actually our what we labeled as our E.U. manager so anybody who came originally contacting us from in Europe would go through him. Unfortunately, his involvement was very limited, and we weren't making any progress globally. While he's active and hangs out on our Facebook site and comments and stuff like that he's actually not involved. To be a part of what we do there is a lot to be involved. Usually we're asking you to fundraise, or asking you to contact your congressman, there's things always going on to with the FAA reauthorization act it still isn't signed by the house so we're always trying to get people to contact. We ask people in some way if you're going to want to join the organization you've got to like contribute.

Aguilar

Ah-hum.

Erwin

But on Facebook we'll say hey here's a sample letter that somebody wrote, writ up...that's terrible English. You know did a sample for us and then we put it on Twitter or Facebook, and they can basically tell congress why they feel a wheelchair spot is important. I guess that would be the extent of our membership. We ask people to sign our petition, we ask people who say are not in our organization to sign our petition, to contact their house people and representatives and tell them why a wheelchair spot would be important to them.

We always have fundraising going on. We just had a Texas Honda Event that just ended, we were chosen to be part of that so that was really exciting. We've been a part of the big North Texas Giving Day thing, fundraising event. We always have going like kickstarter. We're always having some sort of event going on and we always ask people if you can contribute for give aways, if you give over ten dollars we were giving away bag tags for your luggage. Things like that have gotten a lot of attraction.

We do things to get people involved on our social media and like that. I guess that would be a way to be involved. We ask people to like our Facebook page, share our Facebook page, and same with Twitter. Hopefully we will also be having a newsletter, a monthly newsletter and we'll be able to start sharing that with our network. And we do like any other nonprofit we have meetings about how much money we need. What projects are happening, what projects can't happen because there's no funding. What does somebody want to take on as an initiative?

Like Alan, well he's excellent with anything to do with our website and social media and things like that, even though I live on there too. But he wanted to take our website to another level and wanted to have product to sell. So, that actually embarked us on a whole other project of having our name trademarked. Sometimes you just don't know where you're going to end up but now, we're trademarked. Actually, with him asking, Alan asking to sell a product, t-shirts and things like that with our logo and having to trademark it actually helped because there was another organization trying to use our product like our imagery on theirs and call it their own. Now having a trademark, it has helped us because now we have a lawyer protecting us. So...while we're very young as an organization we're certainly learning how to be a bigger, bigger organization.

Aguilar

That makes sense. By trademarking it solidifies your organization just so you're like we'll we've been working this hard we're not just going to let you take all of the work that we have been doing...

Erwin

Exactly, exactly.

Aguilar

That kind of went to my next question, I was actually going to ask you how you were funded? You mentioned the fundraisers, like what else besides the North Texas Giving Day and I think you said the Honda Texas or the Texas Honda?

Erwin

<topic>Funding All Wheels Up</topic>

Yeah, so we just did the Honda Texas Event, that was a really good event for us. I think we were close to \$2,000, and I know that seems like such a small amount of money especially when you see here these huge organizations getting so much money but that will pay for a trip to D.C. where we can network. Those sorts of things are great. When I'm not working on working on presentations and things like that, I would say ninety percent of my time outside of networking is spent on writing grants. I was never a grant writer. I am not an English major and I am the worst person in the world to probably write a grant, but it is probably what I spend all of my time doing. We have been awarded some really wonderful grants. One from the ISTAT Foundation [International Society of Transport Aircraft Trading Foundation] or actually three from the ISTAT Foundation. The ISTAT Foundation is the International Society of...oh goodness, I'm going to mess this up because I didn't write it down, International Society...it's an Aviation Foundation.

(both laugh)

Aguilar

You're good. We can look it up later.

Erwin

Yeah, it's an aviation foundation and when I present I always talk about the ISTAT Foundation because the aviation industry gets such bad credit and so knocked down in the media for not caring for people with disabilities, yet the aviation industry is the only organization that has stepped forward and funded our research so far.

There is one advocacy group in Holland who has funded our work, but again it's the only advocacy group who has funded our work and they are not in the United States. I think that's again really telling, and then we've had other organizations that are not connected with disability like Unico, which is an Italian based like club so kind of like the Lion's Club and they gave us a very large contribution because they believed in our work. We are just super grateful for these organizations for stepping up. The ISTAT

Foundation they actually gave us two grants and one humanitarian award. I thought that that was really again just amazing on their part for recognizing all of our work. Because they're about the future of aviation and so that's, we've proved to them and I'll be actually submitting to them at the end of this month our next application. We'll keep applying.

Aguilar

Does the ISTAT Foundation, are they in the United States?

Erwin

Yes, they are in the United States.

Aguilar

Okay so they are in the United States. Yeah it seems...you would think that because you're a U.S. based organization that you would have more home...

Erwin

Yeah.

Aguilar

...like home funding and help. It's kind of surprising that you're getting a lot of international help, but that's really, it does say a lot like you mentioned before.

Erwin

Exactly, and Q'Straint has donated their product to our crash tests. One day of crash testing just in the product alone, not what it would cost us for say a crash test was probably \$20,000 and they donated all of their product which, is their tie down systems, and they loaned us their surrogate wheelchair. A surrogate wheelchair is a wheelchair that can be crash tested over and over again and will not break. That chair is over \$10,000 and we would one day love to be able to afford our own surrogate wheelchair but right now we can't. It's just something that we...it would just be a cost, we're trying to save for our next crash test. Right now, to build a wheelchair to test is not in our cards right now, but Q'Straint is willing to send it from Miami or Fort Lauderdale and send it back to Buffalo, New York where we do our crash testing.

Aguilar

Oh, okay so when you guys do the crash testing it's not here right? It's not in Texas?

Erwin

Currently it's not. There's not saying that one day, but the testing facility, the FAA testing facility is in that we're currently using is in Buffalo, New York.

Aguilar

Wow that's interesting. That's cool because you now you have the help you need when you do it.

Erwin

Yeah, it's actually really interesting because there's a lot of seating companies, aviation seating companies and they're here in Texas. We're starting to connect with a lot of the Dallas based organizations even in the private sector. We went to a really big meeting me and Tara De'Andrea who is our CEO, or our Chief Operating Officer, and she handles our finances now because that's her background is nonprofit finances and grants. We've been attending some Texas based aviation meetings and things like that so we're starting to network with Texas, local Texas organizations to help us with our projects.

Aguilar

Oh, that's really interesting.

Erwin

Yeah so there's an organization here called SevenBar and they primarily do medical flights and we're trying to show them what we're working on. Right now, the only way that they can transfer somebody is on a gurney and what we're trying to show them is if you had a wheelchair spot on your plane you could also give say somebody who's in a wheelchair another way to fly. For example, there was somebody who had an accident in the Caribbean when they were taking a cruise, they had to leave their wheelchair and then SevenBar flew them back here to the United States, but then they went weeks without their wheelchair and then they had to ship it by sea. It's so big, it's 300 pounds and then this person was left without their wheelchair because there was no way to fly him or his wheelchair back to the United States. We are really trying to open up this wheelchair spot to medical flights as well as humanitarian efforts in regard to evacuations. And show that it's not just for pleasure but we also need to have these wheelchair spots for evacuation reasons as well.

Aguilar

It's not just like no we're not just trying to take a vacation; we're just trying to live a life that we're trying to live in general.

Erwin

Exactly.

Aguilar

So, on that I've gone through most of my questions, but I just wanted to follow up with you. Are there any other endeavors or projects that you think we missed, or we glossed over that you want to mention?

Erwin

<topic>Humanitarian efforts</topic>

Yeah, I think the one that we glossed over is the humanitarian efforts that we're working on. We have spoken to FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] and they're really interested in the project, but unfortunately because they're a government agency, they can't outright publicly support us. And they don't buy product for evacuations, they kind of get involved in the back end unfortunately after the catastrophe has already happened. What we're trying to do is work with agencies. I'm actually going to be speaking April 23, very soon in about two weeks just about how to evacuate people who use wheelchairs. There are some pilots and some people who work in say the disaster area or situations who understand that you can take someone who's in a wheelchair and put them on a C-130 and tie them down with military cargo tie-downs. And the reason I know that is because our board member Vicky...excuse me I got a little tickle, she was evacuated well before cell phones in Hawaii from an airbase on a C-130 and they locked down her wheelchair, and they flew off the island with her still on her wheelchair. But of course, because you can't prove this people don't know where to take this information.

What's interesting is the power of social media and so we put out a call to action saying if you had ever been tied down in your wheelchair on a military cargo plane or in any airplane we'd love to see a photo, and then we actually received a few photos from a gentleman named Gordon Rattray. He was actually working on a project with the U.N., and they were working on disaster situations on a project separate. Basically, they were simulating war and he was there to represent the disability community, but they needed to get him to a remote area for this two-year project and the only way he could get there was to fly and it wasn't through a regular airplane it was in a military cargo plane. And so that pilot said hey we can tie down your wheelchair with military tie-downs and this wasn't any little flight he was flying from France to New Zealand and then on his way back I believe he was flying from New Zealand to Brussels. So, we now have these images of him flying tied down. What I'll be presenting is while we are working on a wheelchair spot for commercial air travel, we also are here to let everybody know that this is a safe viable option for emergency transportation. We've crash tested these tie-down systems, so this shouldn't be, maybe the knowledge of say a C-130 pilot this should maybe be whoever is on the lead of a disaster evacuation mission that this is a viable operation and even if you have a 1C, 130 trying to evacuate people in wheelchairs that you can tie them down with wheelchair tie downs and it's a safe viable option. We're here to prove that flying in your wheelchair is safe and we can also use it for disaster measures.

Aguilar

That's a good topic to touch because I feel like that may be where I think you might get some...what am I trying to say...like some push back. Like oh they're just trying to do it just because they want to be able to fly to a destination, and it's no it's emergency...everyone else gets it so why wouldn't we?

Erwin

Exactly, yeah.

Aguilar

That's interesting. I think we've actually covered most of my questions, but do you have anything else you want to add or anything we missed?

Erwin

I don't think so. I think we covered it. This project has just really been one of labor and love and I've grown as a person from it. It's really amazing. Like I said I was a terrible public speaker and now I actually really like speaking about this project and it's also just because I'm really knowledgeable about it now, so I really like talking about it. I think that when anybody finds their passion it's really easy to talk about. I really appreciate this opportunity, so thank you.

Aguilar

Oh, no we're more than happy to. We're just really glad you said yes. So, if you think we're all set I think we're good to end the recording.

Erwin

Fantastic, thank you.

Aguilar

Thank you.

End of Interview