

Bel's Story

Background

When I was a teenager, I was like pretty much every teenager trying to assert my independence. I was a little stubborn and I wanted to do everything my friends were doing. In my small school, music was a big thing, and with a bunch of my friends starting bands, lunch times were spent at practices and weekends at shows.

Loving music

Going to see my friends play music inevitably led to me going out to see bigger bands at bigger venues. We would wrangle our way through the increasingly large crowds to get the best position. One particular show, right before my 18th birthday, was Good Charlotte at Thebarton Theatre. Back then I thought guys in eyeliner were the epitome of cool.

Limited accessibility at concerts

While I was young, I was not naïve. I knew that my chair meant the mosh pit at the concert was out of the question. My best friend and I picked a spot off to the side, but close enough to the front that the crowd was standing shoulder to shoulder – or shoulder to armrest in my case. If I couldn't be in the mosh pit, I still wanted that experience of being immersed with other fans – or so I thought. As the show kicked up a gear, more and more people began to press towards the front.

Discrimination in action

A small group of slightly older girls came up behind me and realised they couldn't get past my wheelchair. They were unimpressed. Rather than watch the show from where they were behind me, they pushed at my chair. I tried to turn and talk to them, but they weren't listening and the music drowned me out. They grabbed the handles of my wheelchair and tipped my chair forward, suddenly I found myself on the floor. The people around me were too caught up in the show to realise that they were treading on me. I don't remember much of the chaos apart from how hard it was to get a breath in as I lay on the ground. Before I passed out, I had serious thoughts about not making my 18th birthday.

My best friend alerted security, and linking arms to push the crowd back, they cleared enough room to drag me and my chair out of the crowd. The next thing I knew I was waking up to a circle of concerned faces around me. One of the first questions was from a security guard who said "What were you doing? There's a wheelchair area in the back". Aside from the pain in my chest and head, I could feel my face burn with embarrassment. I didn't want to protest that I could not see from the designated accessible area. I didn't want to subject my friends to that, or complain that I had to ask for assistance to leave if I wanted to use the bathroom. Someone called Mark Holloway came to my defence. He was Good Charlotte's tour manager and he has no idea what a crucial part his response played in my life.

An advocate

Mark instantly assured the security guards that I had the same right to be in that spot as everyone else did. His concern was about how badly I was hurt. After a minute or

so I felt okay, and rather than blaming me for the circumstances, Mark apologised for what had happened.

That's not to suggest that anyone should take risks with their safety in huge crowds. I left after watching the rest of the set from the side of stage after meeting the band members who were all equally as apologetic. That's where the spark started for me - with the unquestioning assurance that I should be doing exactly what I wanted, from someone who I saw as immensely important.

Experienced travellers

The next time Good Charlotte came to Australia, my friend and I travelled to Sydney and Melbourne to see them. We were still teenagers, travelling alone, finding hotels to sleep in and making new friends. Navigating the different venues with varied accessibility was the most incredible thing in the world to us. We started travelling interstate for other bands, and soon life at home became a routine of saving up money and counting down days until our next trip.

On one of our weekly daydreaming sessions, lying on the grass down near the beach, I thought about how much distance we'd covered, how many hours we'd spent on planes and in cars. I figured if we could do it here in Australia, why couldn't we do it all over the world? I was inspired to see the world and set myself a goal: to see live music in New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris and Tokyo – all before I turned 25. I took my first international flight to America, intending to tick Los Angeles off my list, first at a famous festival called Warped Tour which was the holy grail of music festivals to me. I was instantly hooked onto travel and experiences. The feeling of accomplishing something I'd only ever dreamed about was great as was encountering just how

different accessibility and attitudes to disability were in North America. We took a trip to Texas to see a band I loved and to Las Vegas, city of true indulgence and excess. Fortunately, we met up with a friend and got an apartment in New York City until our visas expired meanwhile going to see as many shows as possible.

Well-intentioned but hurtful reactions

Showing off photos, talking about all the different things I'd done and seen brought back a lot of the happiness for me. But suddenly people were saying hurtful things even though they had the best intentions. For example my grandparents sent my best friend a card saying "Thank you for taking care of Belinda and going on the trip with her." No matter how much I told myself that any grandparent would say this when their grandchild had returned home safely, It felt like they were undermining my achievement. It felt like they thought my friend had been a support worker instead of a best friend, and while those things aren't mutually exclusive, I didn't want to feel like it had been some kind of favour or chore to assist me. This sentiment was echoed by a few other people and the feeling of being a burden began to dampen some of my happy memories.

I immediately began making plans for my next trip. In March of the next year, I flew to Glasgow and Scotland on my own. I had organised a living arrangement through a friend. Over Easter we caught a bus down to London and I crossed another city off my list. London was followed by a train trip to Paris for my birthday and the second-to-last part of my goal was accomplished. Within a few months I came home and worked in a coffee shop for a while. I missed the slight ease of existing and the feeling that came with being in America, so with a few friends I organised an apartment up in the

Hollywood Hills for the summer. Our upstairs neighbours were a band I'd listened to since I was 15 and the guy who lived next door was a little known English actor who was filming the first movie in a vampire series called Twilight (my bedroom shared a common wall with Edward Cullen's!). I loved every minute of living there, and we spent our time using the apartment as a home base between road trips around the east coast catching up with old friends and making new ones. The ghosts of the feelings of being a burden were well and truly banished.

Home again

Once I had gotten back to Adelaide and caught up with life at home, I immediately started saving to feed my travel addiction with a short trip to New Zealand to spend time with friends.

Of my original goal, Tokyo was the only city left, and with months to spare before my 25th birthday, I flew there and went to the most mind blowing music festival – Summersonic. Prouder than I'd ever been, instead of going home after that a group of my friends and I spent a summer living in a sweet apartment in London, before crossing America again on our way home. We made a special stop at Disneyland which I loved because they have rollercoasters with height restrictions below 120 centimetres.

Life after travel

After settling back in Adelaide once again, I decided to apply for university. While that's settled me down somewhat, I've still made a few sneaky trips over to America and Canada to spend thanksgiving with friends, or see Jay-Z and Justin Timberlake play

at Yankee Stadium, or to go to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter in Orlando. I can't stay too still for too long.

I have learnt a lot from my travels. International flights are different to domestic. Every airline has its own protocol (or lack thereof) when travelling with a disability and this first time, I was flying with Japan Airlines. The travel agent pushed a stack of forms at me and told me to bring them back filled in. I didn't know the dimensions of my chair, what type of batteries it used. I'd gotten it when I was ten years old and never asked those kind of questions. When faced with these forms which ought in to question the issue of responsibility I panicked a little.

Don't believe everything you are told

Travel agents are sometimes helpful but whether you need one or not is a personal decision. The good ones are worth their weight in gold but some are only interested in money. Some people would rather make semi informed guesses than tell you they don't know something. In that same trip where I was left to clumsily stumble my way through the Japan Airline protocols, I was also given wrong information about a hotel in "downtown Los Angeles". The manager at Flight Centre had told me it was "ten minutes to universal studios, ten minutes to Hollywood". What he failed to mention was that those ten minutes were in a car we didn't have. We had to change on public transport in an area that was really not safe for two inexperienced 21 year old girls. We couldn't walk anywhere and we had to be back at the hotel before dark because the streets were rough. It was lucky that we were able to hire a car for a bit of the time which opened up our possibilities and made us feel much more secure, even if it was a little costly.

You are the expert - be independent

That original little mishap only spurred me on to be able to do much more research for myself. Flight information, requirements, hotels and their accessibility the list of things to take into account can seem overwhelming when you first approach it, but no one knows better than you what you need in the way of assistance or how you need it. I found it was easy to make a list, a basic run-through of events on the holiday, what potential obstacles I would face and how I would deal with them. You know what level of support you will need and when.

There will be challenges

While being prepared and well-researched certainly makes things easier, let me stress that even the most thoroughly researched trips will have their challenges. Small lifts, or worse - broken down lifts (which I have encountered on more than a few occasions), inaccessible bathrooms, unhelpful staff, and the list goes on. In France, the boutique hotel staff assured me via email they had an elevator, but they failed to mention it was a manual-close door and it was so small I could only just fit my wheelchair in it. Someone had to shut me in, then race up or down the stairs to the next level in order to let me out. In London, my accessible room was double booked, and a family that required more space but not the accessible facilities checked in first. I was told I could leave my wheelchair in their foyer while I went up to my third floor room via the stairs.

Another block of apartments I stayed at in New York City assured me they had three elevators that would make my life easy. What they failed to mention was that they were up two very large steps. I ended up using their goods and services elevator for the entirety of my trip. Accessibility issues aren't the only problem faced, equipment

failures while you're away from home can be a very scary thing. It was my second trip to New York when I experienced this. While my wheelchair was being taken in half to be loaded into the back of a car, the bracelet my friend was wearing happened to touch the end of the wire that joined my controller to the motors of my wheelchair, causing it to short circuit leaving the wheelchair completely useless. I had not prepared for this and lost two days of my holiday. It was learning from that mistake that had me a little better prepared for a time in Scotland when my wheelchair charger blew up. \$350 later everything was fine. At the time, when things like this come up, it can feel like the end of the world, but it still doesn't take the shine off the experiences I've had.

Maintain a spirit of goodwill

You can't "good-attitude" your way to the third floor hotel room or smile away the family that refuse to leave the room they were given, regardless of how much you need it. It's okay to be disheartened when people and places aren't accommodating, BUT sometimes that smile does help, particularly while you look for solutions, sometimes the outcomes are better.

An example of this was when I first got into Paris. Changing from the international rail, the Eurostar, to the Metro line seemed easy. There were wheelchair symbols on all train platforms and I couldn't find any information that suggested anything less than a smooth transition. Of course, when I got there, I was directed to a HUGE flight of stairs. My weary travel companion, with the best intentions blew up angrily about the lack of access or information and unsurprisingly, we were met with unhelpful frowns and shrugs. Leaving her for a moment to cool off, I approached two other employees of the railway station and trying my absolute hardest to speak proper French and be

polite, I explained the situation. They were all too happy to carry my chair, and my belongings down to the platform we needed. Having to rely on people like that isn't ideal, but with a more positive approach to the situation, I was able to overcome my problem in a way that I absolutely would not have without the gentleman's help.

Travel is an investment in yourself

Making contacts in the location that you intend to travel to is also invaluable. People who live in the city and know how it works can answer questions you may have. On top of that - people who live in those cities with a disability can offer incredible insight. There are also other resources available like books or websites. Any information you can arm yourself with before you make the plunge can be the difference between a good experience and a great one.

So many people I have shared my travel stories with have told me it's something they'd love to do, but numerous things have held them back. The bottom line is usually a fear of the unknown. Anything could happen, and sure, it might. It does take a bit of confidence to take that first step and book a trip but the confidence that you gain from taking on obstacles in a completely different country and succeeding makes the risks well worth the rewards.

Travel is a luxury but it is the best investment you can make in yourself. No matter who you are or where you're going, you never learn more about life and other people or yourself than when you're in a new corner of the world. My travels have not only revealed a lot to me about myself, but contributed immensely to the person I am today.

Disclaimer

This website has been developed by Purple Orange (the shopfront of the Julia Farr Association) to provide public access to information that may be helpful in respect of disability issues.

While our goal is that all the information on this website is accurate and verifiable, we cannot accept responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or relevance of the information to the purpose of anyone visiting the website.

We give no warranty that the information is free of infection by computer viruses or other contamination, nor that access to the website or any part of it will not suffer from interruption from time to time, without notice.

We have included links to other websites as a convenience to visitors wishing to find out more information about disability issues. Julia Farr Association does not accept any responsibility for the accuracy, availability or appropriateness to the user's purpose of any information or services on any other website.

The views expressed in these stories are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Julia Farr Association Inc. or In Control Australia. We do not accept liability however arising, including liability for negligence, for any loss resulting from the use of, or reliance upon, the information expressed in these stories.

In some instances, stories may have been edited for practical purposes, but care has been taken not to change the author's 'voice' or the integrity or purpose of the narrative.

© Bel Owen 2014. Except as provided by the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author.