The Accessible Travel Talk Show

Episode 4: Emergency Airplane Evacuations with Robin Wearley

Guests: Robin Wearley of ADAPTS
Host: John Morris of Wheelchair Travel
Transcript by John Morris

For more information: TravelTalkShow.org

John: Live and on Facebook right now, say hello to everyone, Robin.

Robin: We are not!

John: I'm kidding, we're not!

Robin: Six inches of grey hair. The expression on my face just then was like, uh oh!

John: Yeah, I have a mullet coming in right now. I haven't had a haircut in like four and a half months, so.

Announcer: All right, all right, all right. You're listening to The Accessible Travel Talk Show. In each episode, we'll explore new destinations, activities and ways to travel, inspiring you to open your world. Now, please welcome our host WheelchairTravel.org founder John Morris.

John: Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with my very good friend Robin Wearley. And she is a former flight attendant and the developer of an incredible safety product that aids disabled people in getting on and off the airplane. And Robin, it's such a pleasure to have you here today.

Robin: Well, thank you for having me, John. I'm looking forward to chatting with you and hopefully giving your listeners some valuable information.
**John:** I think with the coronavirus disrupting travel as it has, we missed out on seeing each other a number of times at the Abilities Expos that go on around the country. So it's nice to see your face again here on our recording studio.

**Robin:** Yes, it is.

**John:** So I'm wondering if you could tell the listeners a little bit about who you are, what you do, and maybe how your career developed in air travel and aviation and the medical field and just love for people to to get to know you.

**Robin:** I come from an aviation family. My father was an Air Force pilot and then a commercial airline pilot, and I became a flight attendant. And after about 10 years or so, I went back to school to become a physician assistant and worked in the medical field and the pharmaceutical, eventually the pharmaceutical industry, where I became a frequent flyer. And that's where John and I met and a frequent flyer Facebook group.

**John:** Well, I'm grateful for your friendship and so glad our paths crossed online all those years ago. But I suspect people are wondering why you're on my accessible travel podcast. And the reason is you developed a product for the disability community that solves an air travel problem. It's a very interesting story. Will you tell it?

**Robin:** So one day John called me and he was writing a story about airplane evacuations and wanted to pick my brain about what the plan was for evacuating people with disabilities. And I think my question to you was well, what do you think the plan is? And you answered with, well, I think I'm going to have to either rely on the kindness of strangers or army crawl off this airplane. Yeah. And sadly, that's basically the truth. I mean, flight attendants do what they can and they but they really don't have a method or a device that would help any kind of person with any kind of disability get out of the airplane.

**John:** Right. You know, I remember when I was drafting this article in 2016, it's something that I had wondered for a long time being a frequent flyer who uses a wheelchair and can't obviously evacuate speedily under my own power. I would have to be crawling. I don't have any legs to walk on. And so, yeah, that was a - that was a very important question that I had and I think that others probably wanted to ask. But given
the fact that emergencies are so rare, I think that there are so many other challenges with air travel that disabled people are focused on, that figuring out how to get off the airplane, you know, if it catches fire or crashes is probably one of the last things that they're worried about. Though we, of course, know that there's typically a person who has reduced mobility on every flight, at least one person. And I think that that's probably something that you could attest to from your time as a flight attendant. Do you have anything, any experiences perhaps that you had as a flight attendant involving disabled passengers?

Robin: Well, yes. You know, back when I flew, what we typically did was we put a blanket on the seat that the person sat on. And then what was supposed to happen was we would grab the edges of the blanket to carry them out. But, you know, that's really, really difficult to do for any length of time or any distance. So they never - it's just sort of one of those things that you interview the person and you say, you know, how can I help you get out if there's an emergency? But a lot of times that never happens. As you can attest to that as well. A survey that I have on my website indicates that roughly 80 percent of the time that question never happens.

John: Yeah, I've recently - I've just done a survey of Wheelchair Travel readers and it's not closed yet. So if you haven't taken the survey, go to WheelchairTravel.org and click on that accessible travel survey link. We would really love to have your responses, but I did ask that question. I said, have you ever across any of your flights ever received an individual safety briefing, you know, focused on how to get you off of the airplane in an emergency, that is separate from the standard briefing that's offered to all passengers? And what a lot of people don't know and what I didn't know until I discovered it in an FAA regulation was that flight attendants are supposed to to ask a passenger who needed assistance to get on board the aircraft how they can help in an emergency, because obviously, if I can't board the airplane under my own power, then it's unlikely that I'm going to be able to get off of the airplane under my own power. So I think that that is a very important conversation that should occur between the cabin crew and the passenger. But it doesn't happen all that often. 80 percent is sort of what I'm seeing as well. And so, you know, that's concerning. But we do know that flight attendants go through a lot of training. And so I wonder, you mentioned the blanket method. Obviously, blankets these days are getting much flimsier and they tear easily. And I
think that that would perhaps not be the most effective way of getting off the airplane these days. Right?

Robin: Well, actually, blankets aren't even in coach most of the time unless you're on an international flight. And so they would - the flight attendants would have to grab one from first class and, you know, come back to wherever the passenger was seated and try to get them out that way. But if they're not already sitting on it, if it's not a planned emergency, for example, you know, there's there's extra time involved there. So my idea was to create something like a soft stretcher that would actually have handles that people could hold onto rather than the edges of a blanket. And then it would be configured in such a way that they could go single file down a narrow aisle, or they could go side by side in a corridor. And that was that was the birth of Adapts. After my conversation with you, I sort of tossed and turned all night and woke up in the morning and got out my yoga mat and some rope and and that was the first of seven prototypes. And about a year or two later, and after a successful Kickstarter campaign, we were able to fund our first inventory run and then started going to the Abilities Expos to basically market it to create awareness and and get into conversations with people about their experiences. And then I should add too that, just to give everyone a history lesson. The correct procedures on the airplane that most airlines use are it's called grab and go, where a person grabs someone from under the arms and another person grabs him from behind the legs and they lift him into the aisle and they go single file to the emergency exit. And I think what people forget is, well, they may not forget, but they just don't realize the implications in an evacuation is that their wheelchair is inn cargo - and they're not going to be able to take the time to assemble an onboard wheelchair to get them to the exits. And even if they could, you can't send something sharp like a wheelchair down an inflatable slide. And so, having a background as a flight attendant and having a background in the medical industry, knowing various forms of disability, that, for example, may not allow someone to be grabbed under the arms or what if they don't have legs? You know, you can't grab someone behind the knees if they don't have legs.

John: Yeah, I'd just like to say, I remember, you know, in the days after our conversation, you started messaging me photos of things that you had assembled in your living room. And I was really excited about it, because in the course of writing this article, I had spoken to one major airline and a whole host of flight attendants from
around the industry, and they told me that, you know, there wasn't any device that could be used and that the onboard aisle chair, well, number one, a lot of planes don't have an on board aisle chair and and other instances, you know, the key to a safe emergency evacuation is getting the hell off the airplane as quickly as possible.

Robin: Under 90 seconds.

John: Yes. And so, you know, that's a problem to discuss another time. The fact that disabled people are not included in the tests that each airline has to conduct with their aircraft. I think that, you know, when we're certifying an airframe as safe and that people can be evacuated safely, people like me should be among the passengers on board because I do fly. But, you know, I was very excited to see you creating this product. And I just I should, you know, disclose to the group here that I am a member of the ADAPTS Advisory Council. So it's something that I've been very interested in from the beginning with you. You mentioned that you've been to and showing the product off at a lot of the Abilities Expos. And so, some of the listeners here, if they've attended an Abilities Expo within the last couple of years, you know, there's a very good chance that that they have met you.

Robin: I hope so!

John: But, you know, I think, we hear, a lot of people when they're looking at the product at a show, I think are are like, well, you know, emergency evacuation is rare. I can say, just in my own experience, you know, I've taken 800 and some flights as a wheelchair user and I haven't had to to experience an evacuation yet. So they are rare, but they can happen. And I remember that you had a purchaser, a customer, that purchased the adapters emergency evacuation sling, and they actually had it on board with them in the course of an emergency. So could you tell us a little bit about that?

Robin: Right. So this mom of a teenager who has CP purchased Adapts. She was one of our earliest customers. And a month later, she and her son and husband were involved in an emergency evacuation at Dulles Airport. And they were able to take their son. He was sitting on it already because when they boarded, they used it to make the transfer to boardinging as well. So they were able to get their son to the emergency exit and down the slide. And then the other really interesting piece of this was that they were
able to give it to the flight attendant and say there’s an elderly lady on board who needs help getting out. And so the flight attendants went back into the cabin and used Adapts to get this lady out. So everyone is evacuated fine, it was just smoke in the cabin and they aired on the side of caution and evacuated on the tarmac. But it was an interesting test of both ways in which the sling would be used. So, yes, the passenger may have their own and be seated on it and use it for transfers, if there’s no emergency, great, they go off on their trip to visit grandma or go to Disneyland or whatever. But if there is an emergency, they get out that way. And if it’s also stocked in the safety kits on every airplane, then this simulated the flight attendant going to the safety kit, getting it out and putting the passenger on it. After everyone gets out, they’re able to spend the time to get the passenger on it and get them out and down the slide. And that’s what happened in this particular case. And just so your listeners have a little bit of background, there are basically two kinds of emergency evacuations. One is a planned evacuation and one is an unplanned evacuation. And in a planned emergency. Flight attendants will reseat people to sit next to people who need help getting out. But at that time, they could also go to the safety kit and grab an Adaots, put it on the seat, and assign buddies to help them get out. And in that case, there’s no waiting. Everybody leaves at the same time. In an unplanned emergency, then these things have to happen after the fact, obviously, unless someone’s already sitting on the adapt. But the current procedures for evacuations are based on studies that were done by the FAA at the medical facility in Oklahoma City - they were done in nineteen seventy seven and have not been updated since. And back in those days, not a lot of people were traveling that had disabilities. Now, far more people are enjoying travel. Far more people have the money to travel.

**John:** Well, we should say that those studies were conducted before there was an Air Carrier Access Act.

**Robin:** Right. Long before.

**John:** So, you know, there was there was not a truly established right for disabled people to fly by air when the emergency evacuation studies were conducted.

**Robin:** Well, and the really interesting piece that comes out of that is - number one is the grab and go method. And number two is that these passengers were told to wait until all the able people had left and then the crew or someone would help them get out.
And so having Adapts means they don't have to wait. They don't have to sit in toxic fumes because their seatmate or the person sitting in front of them, or behind them, or across the aisle from them, it's going to help them be carried out at the same time they leave the airplane.

**John:** I think a lot of other things have changed about air travel since those studies were conducted as well, including the the density of the cabin.

**Robin:** Oh, yes.

**John:** You know, we're squeezing more and more seats into airplanes now all the time. And, you know, I suspect in the 70s there was probably, I don't know, three, four or five inches more leg room between seats. And so, there were fewer passengers on board the aircraft and less of a bottleneck at the emergency exit.

**Robin:** Well, I mean, just imagine these tests were conducted on a Boeing 727 that is not even in service anymore. And I think they used - I'll have to look it up for sure, but I think they used 43 passengers and. the configuration was much like what first class is now. The coach configuration was much like what first class is configured now, but you're right, the rows - there's much less distance between rows. So getting in there to help someone get out is much more difficult. If someone is injured or can't be moved is sitting on the on the aisle, then the people outboard in the middle and window seat, they're not going to probably be able to get out until that person is moved. So it's just imperative that everybody leave the airplane as quickly as possible and nobody has to sit and wait.

**John:** All right. You know, and I know that I know that we're here talking about emergency evacuations and the deficiency in planning around those in terms of assisting disabled people. But we would be remiss if we didn't state that we're not trying to scare you. Air travel on the whole is very safe. But even so, you know, as a country right now with the coronavirus, we're facing the circumstance of every death is one too many. And the same - that same principle applies to air travel. And so if it is possible to take efforts to save even one passenger, I think that is something that should be seriously considered in developing a strategy for safely evacuating passengers who are not independently mobile. And, you know, it's not just me coming onto the airplane with
my disability. It could be my seatmate who is able bodied and walked on to the airplane just fine. But in the course of the accident, or the crash, or the emergency landing was injured. And so he may - he could not be conscious, he could have a broken leg, you know, whatever it could be, he may not be able to get off the airplane on his own. And so, you know, this facility for safely evacuating disabled passengers can also apply to those who are disabled in the course of the emergency.

Robin: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And, you know, when we say that these emergencies happen so rarely, it's - if there were one thing I would like everyone, all the listeners, abled or disabled, to kind of take home is, we all need an evacuation plan, whether it's from an airplane or from your house after an earthquake. I live in San Francisco, so we have wildfires and we have earthquakes, and other areas of the country have hurricanes and flooding and, you know, tornadoes and blizzards. I mean, name your natural disaster. You still need some sort of a plan if you expect to get to a shelter and the area outside your home may not be traversable in a wheelchair.

John: Yeah. I think that sort of brings up an interesting point in that Adapts is not just being used by people on airplanes, and it's not only being used in emergencies. Perhaps you could shed some light on some of the other ways that your customers have put the device to use.

Robin: Oh, yeah, it's funny. You know, when I first started this - and I think you and I talked about it - I thought my target market was going to be - I just imagined the people who travel for events like Paralympics or the Paralyzed Veterans Games, you know, those kinds of events where a whole bunch of people get on an airplane. I imagined that kind of traveler would be my key market. And what I'm finding is that's not true at all. You know, sort of our R&D happens in our booth at the Abilities Expo, where people come to me and say, oh, we bought this last year and, you know, we used it for this or that. And one of our fellow vendors actually had been traveling to San Diego for a family reunion. And he was on, I think he said, the third floor of this hotel. And the day of the reunion, the elevator went out and he has a power chair and they couldn't get him off the floor and down to to be able to go to the reunion, so he missed the family reunion.
John: I remember at, I think it may be at one of the one of the very first expos you attended - The Adapts team and I were hanging out, and we thought that it would be a good idea to show that use case of getting out of a hotel.

Robin: Yeah.

John: And we actually shot a video of me being carried down the stairs of a hotel as if there were, you know, a fire at the hotel or some evacuation necessary and the elevators were out or unsafe to use. And it worked fairly well. Two guys, I think it was Yasin and Jeremy maybe, I don't remember.

Robin: And Logan, all three of you guys were there, filming and whatnot.

John: Oh, yeah. And so anyway, they carried me down the stairs. And then, eventually, you decided that that my face was too ugly to go on the banner so you had me cartooned.

Robin: No! I cartooned everybody!

John: And so there is now a cartoon picture of me on the Adapts website being carried down the stairs. But, you know, I won't hold that against you. I'm looking pretty rough right now, especially with my coronavirus mullet.

Robin: Yeah, well, I found that our customers have become our R&D. And I think when we talked about that, we said, oh, let's go make a video. So every time someone asks us a question, if we're together, we make a video in response to that. But yeah, we have a YouTube channel and when we get these questions, we as quickly as we can, we get a video together and post it to show various uses, I mean, what happened with you down the stairwell - They were carrying you side by side because you had more width in that corridor and then down the stairs. Interestingly, a lot of my customers now are school districts, because the kids - it's much less expensive for a teenager to have an adapts up their wheelchair or under their, in their backpack or something at school than it is to spend the money on an expensive stair chair that only one person can use at a time. And once it's been used to go down several flights of stairs, somebody's got to bring it back up to get the rest of the people. So, for the price of one stair chair,
everybody in the school that's disabled could pretty much have their own Adapts with them all the time.

**John:** I keep my Adapts tucked into my backpack, and I'm fortunate that I haven't had to use it in an emergency situation yet. But I know that I'm safer because of it. And I think that, you know, level of reassurance is incredibly valuable and something that people can count on. They have a safer, more comfortable way to get out quickly from any emergency. And I just - I think it's a wonderful thing that you created. I still think it's so funny that it all came together, you know, after we just had a conversation about, you know, what actually happens in an air travel emergency and you got straight to work on it. That night you were at your house building something, putting it together. And it's been so wonderful to see the product's development over the course of these last years and then also to hear from customers who have put it to use for any number of uses, emergency or not. I remember you telling me once that someone used it to get into their swimming pool or their hot tub at home.

**Robin:** Yeah, and that's a - you know, it's water resistant. So, yeah, we have people that, you know, let's say you go to a friend's house and they don't have an accessible pool or you go to a hotel. And how often is the pool is not working? People tell me they're almost never serviced and almost always not working. And so, you know, it's a backup plan. It's just people come up with ingenious ways to use it. Getting in and out of the dentist's chair, I met Miss Wheelchair California twenty eighteen at a highway patrol event up in Sacramento, and she came right up to the booth and said, oh, my gosh, I needed this a week ago when my apartment building had a fire, and we had an alarm and had to get out - and I would have needed this back then, and so she came on board as our spokesperson for disaster awareness.

**John:** Well, I think another another good thing that's come out of this is that we, you know, have been able to raise some awareness about the lack of planning that has gone into emergency situations and how they affect or impact disabled people. I feel like the fact that no one really had a good answer when I was asking airlines and flight attendants, you know, how I was going to have a chance of survival after a crash - shows that, you know, a lot of work needs to be done to to consider how we are going to save the lives of the people who can't save their own. And so, I'm so excited that this has come about and that it's generating this conversation. And I hope that eventually
we'll be able to see and Adapts on every airplane that's transporting passengers, not just in the United States, but across the world. And we already have the story of a situation in which the sling was used to evacuate someone from an airplane that had smoke in the cabin and created a situation where all the passengers thought the plane was on fire. And so that's specifically what you have to get out of. So I think that's wonderful. We unfortunately, Robin, are out of time. And I know that there are a hundred other things that we could talk about. I'd just like you to tell people how they can find you on the Internet and any, you know, last words you'd like to share before we go.

Robin: Oh, last words! Well, they can buy Adapts on our website at Adapts.org, not dot com. And that's A D A P T S dot org and we have tons of videos on there. You can do the direct links to our YouTube channel and please follow us on Facebook and Instagram and Twitter. And for those of you listening today, John's listeners, we've created a promo code for 15 percent off and that promo code is WCT - stands for wheelchair travel - so WCT15 and that's for the 15 percent off. And if you go online to our shop page and, at the time check out, enter that WCT one five code and it'll take 15 percent off. We've also added quad pay so you can divide up the payments into four monthly payments. And so that makes it a little bit easier to.

John: Well, yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much, Robin, for sharing all this information and also for that wonderful promo code. That's WCT 15, one five, that you can use at adapts dot org. Thank you - Thank you so much for for chatting with me today, Robin. And I hope that we'll be able to get back together in person soon.

Robin: Me too, John. Thank you for having me. It was really fun.

Announcer: Thanks for listening to The Accessible Travel Talk Show. To join the conversation and access the show notes, visit TravelTalkShow.org. And don't forget to keep up with John at WheelchairTravel.org, your source for accessible travel inspiration. See you next time.