

ADVOCATES

First, we listen ...

"Each of Us Is a Person First"

By Monica Perkins, 3rd Prize Winner

2011 is here. We have made great strides in technology, politics and going green. Yet, we continue to fail in the most basic area of life; humanity.

This past September, I had the privilege to accompany several disabled people to a National Self Advocacy Conference in Kansas City, MO. One of these individuals, we will call her Jane, has muscular dystrophy. She is bound to a battery operated motorized wheelchair, with no lower body control and very limited use of her upper body. However, she is one of the strongest people I know. She is vice president of the Greater Framingham Self Advocates Together, and is a wonderful advocate for herself and others. And yet, this incredible person was only seen as her disability and treated less than human during the flights to and from the conference.

Jane and five of her companions boarded a Delta aircraft September 23, 2010. It took a crew of four people to dead lift Jane from her wheelchair to her bulkhead seat on the plane. Jane is accustomed to these dead lifts; she has to utilize them whenever a Hoyer lift is unavailable. They make her nervous, especially if the people involved have never done it before. The slightest bump or wrong move of one of her limbs causes extreme pain and can result in broken bones.

Each plane ride involved four of these transfers. The first flight was nerve racking, but went well. We landed in Minnesota and started to transfer Jane. Mid transfer, we were told by the pilot that we had to stop so his crew could get off. Jane remained in her seat, and we waited for the crew to disembark. As one of the flight attendants walked by, her arm swung out and hit Jane's upper arm. We were taken aback, but chalked it up to a tight aisle, hoping that she didn't mean to do that. We finally disembarked, and prepared to board our connecting flight to Kansas City, MO.

The plane sat at the departure gate for about a half hour before a flight attendant approached Jane and stated that her motorized wheelchair couldn't be put in the cargo hold due to "safety reasons". We were very confused, as the chair was on the previous

flight without problems, and Jane had spoken to Delta prior to the trip about special accommodations she would need, and was assured it wouldn't be a problem. The flight attendant then proceeded to tell Jane that she could either get off the plane, or they could send her wheelchair later, We attempted to explain that the wheelchair was Jane's only means of getting around, and taking it away was equivalent to taking away her legs. However, there was no reasoning with the flight attendant, and we had to consent to put the wheelchair on another flight. The flight attendant then got on the loud speaker and announced to the plane that the reason for our now 45 minute delay was due to an individual in a wheelchair. Jane spent the whole flight embarrassed; she could hear people on their phones prior to take off talking about the "woman in the wheelchair who refused to get off the plane" and had to endure stares and whispering. When we landed in Kansas City, Jane had to sit in a manual wheelchair while we waited three hours for hers to arrive. Not only was Jane physically and emotionally exhausted and embarrassed, but her transfer pad was out of place, cutting into her skin, and was a risk for infection. She was tired; felt belittled and devalued, and hadn't had access to a restroom in over 15 hours. And on top of it all, Jane's wheelchair had been damaged. When she took it to the wheelchair repair service at the conference the next morning, they estimated the damages to be around \$6,000.

The next morning I was on the phone with Delta customer service reps, explaining to them the treatment Jane had received and wanting to speak to a supervisor to ensure that this wouldn't transpire on our return trip home. The Delta service rep stated that it was not their fault, and that we should have told them we needed special accommodations when we booked the flight. I assured them that not only did the travel agency tell them, but Jane made a personal phone call to Delta to explaining to them exactly what she needed. I spoke to a supervisor who guaranteed that Jane would be all set for her return trip home and would receive top service.

We woke up early for our flight, and everything went smoothly form our flight from Kansas City to our connecting flight in Detroit, MI. The plane landed a little late, and we had to rush to the next gate. When we arrived, we were told the flight was full, and the seat they had available for Jane was located in the back of the plane, which would be impossible for her to access. We were also told that they had no knowledge of Jane being in a wheelchair. The Delta rep said that we could be put on the 3:40 pm flight home, which would mean that we had to wait around the airport for almost seven hours; again, with no way for Jane to use a restroom. I was beyond frustrated, and demanded to speak with a supervisor. I spoke with a very nice woman, and broke down in tears while explaining the atrocious way Jane had been treated by Delta. She was able to get us on a 1:30 pm flight home, and state that she would make phone call son our behalf regarding the way Jane had been treated.

It is high time that we take a stand for equal treatment of everyone. Whether you have physical limitations, mental limitations, are young, old, black, white, whatever it is, we are all people, and are all born with the basic right of human dignity. The way Jane was treated by Delta airlines is unacceptable, and as long as society allows people to treat other people this way, it will continue to happen. It is time to rise up for equal rights for everyone and make sure they are enforced, and to hold people and corporations accountable when they discriminate against someone. As Albert Einstein said, "the world is a dangerous place. Not because of those who do evil, but because of those who stand by and do nothing". It is time to start making this world a less dangerous place to live.