

[Music] [Narelle] Hello and welcome to another episode of The Digital Access Show. This episode is going to be slightly different. Now, you all know Mark Muscat, the director of - I don't know what you did, but the director of Digital Access Solutions Assistive Technology. And I'd like to introduce you to a very lovely lady, Illese Smithwick. Illese also happens to be the one that puts up with Mark, 24 hours a day as Mark's partner. Hello, Mark and Illese. Thank you for doing this. [Illese] Hi, Narelle. [Mark] Hello. [Narelle] Now, the reason what we're on this, the other directors and I sent Mark off on a special project. Illese backed us up and said yes, we're going. And the special project was to take a holiday, but a holiday with a difference. What we said is, when you go, didn't care where you went. We wanted Mark to look at accessibility, digital accessibility. And in everything they did, what were the great things that they saw and learnt about accessibility and digital accessibility, and what were the issues? What could have been done better? What was, just made life so easy? So Mark, Illese, tell us about what you guys did. And where you went. [Illese] You want to do that? [Mark] Well, um, yes, it was, I got sick and tired of hearing the agenda item, my leave. So, I - uh [Narelle] [laughs] So I uh decided to [Narelle] At every meeting - I will tell you, it was every team meeting, that was the number one. [Mark] It was for the whole 12 months I believe [laughs]. So, um, when Illese wrote to me with the idea of doing a series of activities, I, well, one because I like her. And two, said yes, because I wanted to explore the world a little. And um, having an interest in accessibility, I thought that I would, probably. [Narelle] Can I just mention Mark has no sight? [Mark] No, no sight, I've got no functional vision. I've got light perception only. So, that was something that I said - um, why not? So, Illese, do you want to tell us what we did? I can't remember. [Illese] I did throw it over to him to do that part, but anyway. Um, okay, so we planned a holiday to go from here to New Orleans. We were in New Orleans for a week and we attended the Jazz Festival. Then after New Orleans, we flew up to Vancouver before getting on to a cruise that went up through Alaska and then repositioned back to Japan. So, that was going, that took us a month to do all of that. And it was nothing short of amazing. There was a lot of learning curves in there, which was great because Mark and I haven't been, or hadn't been together for very long when we first started planning this. So, for someone from the sighted community who has never had interaction with the visually impaired, it was a huge learning curve for me. But ahm, but certainly well worth every second of it. [Mark] And ahm, [Narelle] Okay. [Mark] And from my point of view, it was interesting to do all the planning, having a look at what's accessible, what, what what is available for people with low vision or no vision. And it was, so it ended up being quite different to what I actually found during research. So, we'll talk about that. [Narelle] Okay, well, let's start off with the first one, the plane flight. [Narelle] Got to get there somehow. What were your - what was the best part? What were the issues? What was the accessibility like? [Illese] All right, best part was being able to make every flight. So, we flew Brisbane to Auckland through to Houston, through to New Orleans. And, of course, no one likes flying economy. I'm sure I'm not the only one with that one, but it was bearable. The one thing for me that was a huge sa, saving grace when we were traveling was having that assistance at the plane. We had the option of getting it in Brisbane. We didn't need it. Mark's quite capable of walking and, you know, I was able to lead him through. That was no problem. But it was when we got to the other international airports, especially the big one like Houston, to have someone there to help us to get from one gate to another. Across the terminal to a different terminal, all that kind of

thing, was a huge saving grace. Even if Mark hadn't been there, you know, it would have been a huge advantage for me. But because they know where they're going. But having- walking with Mark, Mark walks a lot slower than me, obviously, because it's unfamiliar territory. And I understand that. And I also understand that a lot of people don't like the concept of getting into a wheelchair or being taken by a wheelchair. Because you're not physically incapable of walking. However, from my perspective, it was the best thing ever. Mark agreed to go into the wheelchair. We, and they literally just sped us through from one terminal to another. They walked us through. And I mean, I had trouble keeping up with the wheelchair. You know, so that's a good thing, you know, because they were keeping pace. But not only that, when you've got the assistance as well, you then get through the shortcut through the assistance or accessible lines. So, you know, we'd be walking with everybody else from all the different planes in the, you know, that have arrived. And there's 200 people lined up. And we just get whizzed straight through the accessible line. [Narelle] For Customs and things like that, you're talking about? [Illese & Mark] Yeah. [Illese] To go through Customs, to go through, you know, any, anything that we needed to go through for approval. We really got whisked through, so. [Mark] It's interesting how the policies are different in each country. Because, um, meet and assist in Australia pretty much, well, they do use the people movers. Which is the little electronic carts that, you know, people sit on and they move people that way. Which is no different to actually sitting in a wheelchair. So, um, you know, as much as you think, you know, I don't really want to. It's pretty much the same as what, you know, whether it's a people mover or a wheelchair, it's going to be the same. And I think it, I think, for the, um, when I was talking to one of the staff, um, it's also there to highlight the fact that they are actually doing, um, you know, they're actually doing a service for somebody. So that people do move out of the way. I think if you walk with a cane, um, and, if you've got a sighted guide, that's not so easy for them to actually get you through quickly because, you know, people just wouldn't take notice as much as if you're in a wheelchair or in a people mover. So, that, that, [Narelle] That's actually a good point. I haven't thought of that. [Mark] Well, that's, that, and when I thought about that, I thought, well, that makes sense. Considering that Australia doesn't use, I know they do wheelchairs for meet and assist in Australia. But, um, we don't use them as much as other countries. But every country we were in - US, Canada, um, and even Japan, we didn't need any meet and assist in Japan, but I believe that's what they do. They all use the same protocol. So that was quite interesting. I want to step back to the website and the app, though. So the website for Air New Zealand was actually quite nice. It was quite reasonable to get around. I found the app, actually, to be, um, rather useful. Um, United Airlines, which is the other airline that we used, um, was, uh, again, the website, um, was, uh, about as good as you would expect from any airline website. Um, it would, um, it was, um, a little bit tricky to use. But, uh, you certainly could use it. Uh, I was using, uh, back when we were ordering the tickets, I was using NVDA, um, for that. Um, and when we were doing the research for the flights, et cetera, um, I found a lot of the websites, um, weren't accessible. They, they were very, clunky to use. They were very difficult. Um, so using the actual airline sites, uh, was the best. And some of them were, weren't really that consistent. Um, which is disappointing. It's, it's a sector that needs to be, um, seriously, uh, spoken to or, uh, some way, you know, conveyed to that accessibility is important. Because we all have to travel from one place to another. Um, we, hotels, we used booking.com which is fairly useful. Um, it's, uh, it's, um, again, there's some accessibility issues with

booking.com but everyone would probably have experienced that. And, um, we used the, um, uh, the IHG website, which is the, um, the website for the Holiday Inn, branded hotels, that in the end, we actually ended up ringing them and making the booking for the holiday Inn that we, uh, we stayed at, um, so, um, that, um, that, um, that sort of indicates how inaccessible that website was. [Mark, to Illese] Is there anything else? [Illese] Um, so when we arrived at New Orleans, we got an Uber, um, purely for financial reasons. It was, um, it was just as easy. Well, it was eight o'clock at night. It was easier to get into a, an Uber and get, you know, get into town, than try and navigate the bus systems at that time. [Mark] And we were tired. [Illese] And we were tired. And then of course we went to the New Orleans Jazz Festival. [Narelle] Yeah. [Illese] We organized the tickets for that online, um, and Mark did a lot of homework and got in touch with the accessibility side. [to Mark] Do you want to talk about...? [Mark] So the Jazz Festival has a, um, access, um, uh, sorry. An accessibility officer, and I'd suggest that you might want to get her on, uh, one of the podcast episodes, Narelle. Her name is Natalie and she did an excellent job. Um, so the up for the Jazz Festival was that it was very accessible. Um, the website wasn't too bad. Um, I found it to be, uh, somewhat informative. I wasn't too happy about the ticketing. Because the ticketing was done through a third party. I think, Illese, you ended up having to buy those. [Illese] Yeah. [Mark] Um, so yeah, I was - I've fed that back. So they're, um, hopefully, you know, they'll look at that next year and make sure that, um, that that's more accessible to- for us. Um, but, um, her role is more than that. Her role is to also provide, um, information and also assist with, um, getting support for people with, uh, various, um, um, impairments. And for us that meant that, um, we could have and - we took this up an orientation mobility session around the actual grounds, not during the actual jazz festival. But it was actually the day before. And that was actually very, very useful. Now I've been to the Blues Fest in Byron Bay for the last, uh, in the last 20 years, I've been for the last 15 of those 20 years. [Narelle] Yeah. [Mark] And I can say that the Blues Fest with all the mud and the, the rain and all that could learn from that, um, kind of set up. Because, what they did with the Jazz Fest is - everything was well pathed, It was well, from what I could tell, because the orientation mobility specialist that I had, He was also vision impaired. So he was telling me that visually, it looked really, really good. The markings are very distinct, very, um, well set up. For a totally blind person like myself, it wasn't too bad. Um, I'd still, I still would have relied on other people to guide me around. I think with all the people around, it was just pretty hectic. But I felt, um, that that session was more valuable than anything else. Um, you know, including the app in the sense that I was able to get an idea of the actual mapping of the, um, the various stages and the, the tents and so forth. So that made our job a lot easier. And, um, Illese was there as well, which was quite [Narelle] So how did you feel, Illese, with getting Mark around the jazz festival with, I imagine the number of crowds and everything else, where you're his partner, but you're not his carer or his support or anything else. [Illese] Exactly. [Narelle] How was that for you? That orientation mobility must have made a huge difference for you. [Illese] It did. Absolutely. And I'd highly recommend if anyone was going to an unfamiliar place to certainly take the, you know, the opportunity if it arises. Um, being there and seeing the place beforehand, knowing that there were accessible stages for, you know, for people to, or disability stages for people to access, um, special toilets and special codes for those toilets. Just added to the experience and made it so much easier when we were there. Of course, as you say, you know, with the crowds and

everything, that was a lot more challenging. Um, and of course, you know, it gets frustrating because you just think, you see these oncoming people and they're either looking at their phones or eating their ice creams or whatever. And they're not looking where they're going. And you just get so frustrated that they, you know, they're in your face before, you know, before they realize that you're trying to help somebody get through.

[Mark] And just to highlight that how useful that was. Illese went and did something on her own, uh, one of the days that were there. And I obviously did what I wanted to do. And we both agreed that we'll just meet up at the, um, at the festival. And, um, yeah, we, you know, the fact that I knew where gates were and all that sort of stuff. Um, and a little help through WhatsApp. We were able to, you know, negotiate our respective activities. And eventually met up. And I don't think I would have had that confidence. Uh, if I had not had that orientation, uh, around, uh, throughout. [Narelle] Do you realize, Illese and Mark, we've now done the first episode. We're going to have to do a part two because I want to hear more about this. [Illese and Mark] [laughing] [Narelle] So, Illese, Mark, can you give one take away from the flight and the blues jazz festival? And then we're going to do part two. [Illese] A take away... [Narelle] What's one take away that you could give to everyone listening? [Mark] I've gotta say the Rolling Stones for me. [Illese & Narelle] [laughing] Um, yeah. [Mark] I mean, I could, I could say a whole lot. But the Rolling Stones was definitely up as one of the performances of it, obviously, in my life, um, yeah. [Narelle] And from the sounds of it, it was just an accessible event for you. [Illese] My take away for that event was amazing. Um, we, I would highly recommend people do it. Don't be scared. Get it, you know, get on a plane and go there and do it. [Mark] Yeah. [Illese] I'm happy to volunteer as a tour guide. [Mark and Narelle] [laughs] [Illese] We'll come back to this a little bit later on. But the takeaway would be don't feel compelled to stay in the French quarter of New Orleans. Even though it is the touristy, you know, center because it's harder to navigate. Maybe we'll touch on that in the next podcast. [Narelle] Okay. Well, thank you, guys. Thanks - we'll do part two next week. So [Illese] Great. [Narelle] this is episode 24 of the Digital Access Show. So if you like what we do, please like, subscribe, review, Google reviews, and tune in next week to hear all about the second part of Mark and Illese's special project. See you then. [Illese] Thanks, Narelle. [Mark] Thanks, Narelle. [Music]