

## **WHEN THINGS DON'T GO AS PLANNED ...**

In April 2014 I was privileged to fly to Broome, Western Australia for the weekend. I was thinking about the articles I was writing for this edition of the CRAFT e-magazine about the Disabled Access - Importance of Psychological and Physical Access and I wanted to include an experience encompassing both psychological and physical barriers. Who would have thought that I would have the perfect set of circumstances presented to me – I was the chosen one!

It all started well before the 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014. By now I was a seasoned traveller and was aware of the boxes I had to tick to make my trip a success. I had organised my flights to that I didn't need to stay overnight anywhere (I flew via Perth for a connecting flight to Broome), I organised my accommodation in Broome and a direct flight from Broome to Brisbane – perfect!

Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014 arrived. I try to book flights mid morning so that I'm not up with the sparrows and it allows me the morning to do all my usual things (shower, toileting etc) – my flight left at 11.15am. I'm always early to appointments and this day was no different. I arrived at the airport by 9.30am (told you I was always early!) so I had time to go to the Qantas Club (I was upgraded to Business Class) for a coffee and breakfast. At 11am I went to the reception desk as I was concerned – normally I am the first person they board (first on and last off) and they should have boarded me at 10.45am at the latest. Realising the urgency they immediately called for ground staff to come and collect me. I could see the gate from the doorway but they wouldn't let me go there as they were responsible for me!

Eventually the ground staff arrived, took me to the gate and I went on last as I was in Business Class. I sat next to a delightful man who turned out to be a member of the Dave Matthews Band road crew. There were 18 of them who had just flown in from Chicago and were on their way to Perth so the flight being delayed was not what they needed. Just behind me, a passenger kept slamming the overhead locker shut

but the catch was broken so an engineer came on board, emptied the locker and taped it closed with duct tape – I didn't think it was a good look.

We started to taxi away from the tunnel and the flight attendants started their spiel when an emergency announcement came over the PA "THIS IS YOUR CAPTAIN SPEAKING, PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR SEAT, PUT YOUR SEATBELT ON AND ASSUME TO BRACE POSITION. WE ARE ABOUT TO LOSE ALTITUDE!" – we were still on the ground. Then there was a barrage of emergency announcements, - there was obviously something wrong with the computer so we pulled back into the tunnel. Suddenly the passengers at the rear of the plane complained about hot steam coming through the floor boards so we all had to disembark.

The passenger seated next to me offered to sit with me while I waited for the airport chair. Airport chairs are the most undignified chairs around – I was just left at the entrance of the gate just far enough away that I couldn't gain anyone's attention. My niece phoned me from Melbourne as she was to meet me in Perth and travel with me to Broome – I said that our flight is now being delayed and that I would miss my connecting flight to Broome. I also complained that I couldn't move the airport chair (as I couldn't touch the floor or operate the wheels, as wheels tiny) or gain their attention – my niece suggested that I start throwing things!!

Eventually I was taken back to the Qantas Club in the inaccessible airport chair to cheers from the Dave Matthews Band road crew who said they would meet me in the Qantas Club lounge. Five hours later at 4.15pm we reboarded the plane – needless to say I had missed my connecting flight to Broome, had no one to support me in Perth – I was on my own!!

I am grateful that Qantas delivered me safely to Perth but it was never my intention to stay overnight. I was told as it wasn't my fault that I missed the flight, Qantas would pay for my overnight accommodation, my taxi fares from and to the airport, my evening meal and my breakfast.

There was nothing more they could do for me – it was up to me to make the best of it. Little did I know just how far it would push me!

I arrived at the Motor Lodge organised through Qantas and waited for the people to disperse to their room. As the front desk was above my head, I sat back so I could be noticed. A young fellow, (let's call him Phil) without looking up shouted 'Next', I said my name and said that an accessible room had been organised for me through Qantas. Again, not looking up, he slapped a key card and a small carton of milk on the counter and pushed them towards me. I reached up, took the key card and the milk, then I asked could he take my luggage up to the room? He stood up to his full height and said '**Normally people like you have someone with them**'! I was aghast at his attitude; people like 'me' go to an enormous amount of trouble to avoid such incidences as these. We organise connecting flights where 'we' have friends or family to meet 'us' – this did not happen because the flight was delayed. If 'we' tried to organise for every contingency 'we' wouldn't venture anywhere which is hardly living as a human. Nothing is done on a whim.

Phil quickly came around the counter, grabbed my bag/bed rail and took-off toward the elevator. I was left to struggle out of the reception area, up a bump to the footpath and follow in his direction. It would have hastened the whole procedure had he put my bag/bed rail down near the elevator and physically helped me – common courtesy.

Almost out of breath I entered the elevator and we went up a level. I exited, followed his verbal directions, got halfway down the corridor and then he called out to me saying that we were on the wrong floor! We got back into the elevator, so I decided to make small talk and asked 'how his day had been?' He then launch into a tirade about how busy he was due to Qantas flight delays – 'that he was run off his feet' which I found quite offensive being a person with quadriplegia and muttered under my breath 'at least you have feet to run off'!

We arrived on the right floor and entered the room, I asked where the light switches were (I'm legally blind) and could he please place my bed rail between the mattress and base of the bed? He dropped the bed rail

on the floor near the bed and I said 'no, it goes between the mattress and the base'. Again he made mention that I should have some-one with me as he didn't have time. I wanted to say that it wasn't my idea to stay overnight in Perth either!

I then asked about the evening meal and he told me that the restaurant was about 500 metres down the road at another Motor Lodge, and then he looked at me, shrugged his shoulders about how I was going to get there. With that took-off again leaving me to it. About 20 minutes later the telephone in the room rang and I was unable to fit between the two beds to answer it (so much for the room being accessible)!! I could tell by the ring tone that it was an internal call so I called reception on my mobile. Phil answered and said that he had tried to telephone me but I didn't answer – I explained that I couldn't reach the telephone (no suggestion that he might make the telephone accessible for me!) so he said 'now that I have you on the phone, we do have frozen meals of butter chicken etc'. I said I was a vegetarian and his comment was 'it was just a suggestion' then he just hung up! Needless to say I didn't have an evening meal or breakfast. I called Qantas to let them know that I didn't use any of the food vouchers. Qantas offered to bring me food, by this time it was 9.30 at night so I said not to worry about the evening meal, just give me breakfast at the Qantas Club before my flight to Broome.

The windows in the room were filthy – I don't think that anyone had opened the curtains in a long time. The room had an overall grubby feeling. I opened the curtain so the sunlight would wake me in the morning as I couldn't get an early 'wake up' call because I couldn't reach the telephone!! When things start going wrong, every little thing that you wouldn't normally notice stands out like a beacon.

Phil is not a 'front of desk' person especially dealing with people being quite stressed about their situation of delayed/missing flights. This man has 'zero' people skills and I will not be recommending the Motor Lodge for accessible accommodation.

Arriving at Perth Airport for my flight to Broome my confidence started to return – Qantas really gathered around me (I felt quite famous) and made sure everything went smoothly for me. I have travelled extensively throughout the USA, London, Singapore and interstate in my present condition and never have I felt so frightened, abandoned and vulnerable as I did at the Motor Lodge.

On my arrival in Broome, you would swear that I was royalty! The place I had booked to stay at, arranged for a limousine to pick me up. The resort itself was not particularly accessible for me but the staff was fabulous and one soon overlooked any slight deficits. Anything major there was always obliging staff to help out. What a difference good staff make for making a place psychologically accessible.

I felt as though I was on a different planet and my time away was worth every second of my experience.

It saddened me to write a letter to the Motor Lodge in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when one could expect better treatment towards People with Disabilities. I am such a person with disabilities – quadriplegia and vision impairment to name a few. I am delighted to say that within an hour of emailing my letter to the Manager, he called me personally and agreed to all of my demands - I asked for an apology, staff training in the field of disability and a confirmation that my experience will never happen again to a person with disabilities travelling on their own!

This is a classic case of psychological access – there are times when you have to toughen up and roll with the punches, as I said before, pick your battles and this was one I picked. This episode left me feeling frightened, abandoned and vulnerable especially as I was totally on my own but not for long – I had such a magical time in Broome, it was all worth it. I don't hold grudges – I always wipe the slate clean every morning!!

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