



## **Travelers with Special Needs Learn Ins and Outs of Airports**

*Travel can be especially stressful for individuals with disabilities...or it can open doors. During October, members of the Special Needs Alliance participated in programs in Chicago, Houston and Phoenix that were designed to introduce those with special needs to the airport experience.*

*The Houston and Phoenix events were part of a nationwide program, Wings for All, organized by The Arc of the U.S., hosted by its local chapters and partially funded by SNA. SNA members in those cities volunteered their time.*

*The Chicago program was conducted by American Airlines and Clearbrook, a large nonprofit that serves individuals of all ages who have intellectual and developmental disabilities. To date, the airline and its employees, who volunteer their time, have hosted 30 such events throughout the country.*

## **Wings for All/Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport/October 7**

Ninety family members and 170 volunteers signed up for a day organized by Arc of Arizona, along with American and Southwest Airlines. “The kids were so excited,” reports SNA volunteer Emily Kile, [Kile & Kupiszewski LLC](#), Scottsdale, AZ. “All of the helpers wore bright pink shirts so we could be easily identified, and the kids would cry, ‘There’s another pink shirt!’ when they spotted one of us.”

Kids at the Phoenix airport get a feel for the travel experience.

The day was all about easing anxieties and answering questions, so prior to the event, volunteers were trained—including a video of similar events—on what to expect and how to help parents and their children.

“I directed families to the sky train,” says Emily. “Kids had definite opinions about whether to take the elevator or escalator.” A separate security line was set up for the families, and they watched as their belongings traveled down the conveyor belt through x-ray.

The pilots and other crew members explained boarding passes and talked about the planes, two of which took them on a 30-minute ride around the tarmac. They left with goody bags to remind them of the day.

## **Wings for All/George Bush Intercontinental Airport, Houston/October 10**

SNA volunteer [Bryn Poland](#), Baytown, Texas, acted as roving photographer during the airport event organized by The Arc of Texas, The Arc of Fort Bend County and United Airlines. “I kept noticing that a parent would get left out of what should have been a family shot, so I’d offer to snap pictures of all of them with their smart phones. Sometimes a kid would be unwilling to relinquish the family phone, so I’d use my own, then text their pictures.”

Families talked to SNA volunteer Bryn Poland about the difference that the day’s events may make in their lives.

The pilot “host” visited with families in the boarding area, explaining how to find their seats on the plane and what to do once onboard. He told them about his own son with autism and how much he believed in the Wings for All program. Each year he organizes his work schedule in order to take part.

While there were plenty of treats and tables for coloring if a child got the urge, the day’s focus was learning. The organizers tried to make each step as realistic as possible, while being sensitive to the children’s special needs. Therapy dogs met them at the gate to keep them calm and occupied during wait time.

“In the boarding area, I began talking to a mom and dad who were there with their 11-year-old son,” says Bryn. “The father was from Ecuador and hadn’t been back to see his relatives since their son was born, because they were so worried about traveling with him. ‘Maybe we’ll be able to visit now,’ said the dad. And that got me thinking. Houston is a city of immigrants and of people from other parts of the country, There are probably many families in similar situations. Events like Wings for All can really help those families reconnect to loved ones outside of the city.”

### **American Airlines Mock Event/Chicago O’Hare International Airport/October 14**

More than 120 “travelers,” some as young as six, learned how to navigate an airport, thanks to a partnership between American Airlines, its volunteer employees and the nonprofit Clearbrook, which serves individuals with autism in northern Illinois. To date, 35 similar events have been hosted nationwide, and for some of the employees, this was their fifth year.

Mitch poses with a certificate commemorating the day. He’s wearing the pilot’s cap given by a new friend, and with him is his dad, Brian.

“They took us through the entire process,” says SNA President Brian Rubin, [Rubin Law, A Professional Corporation](#), who attended with son Mitch, who has autism. “We received boarding passes printed with our names, flight number, gate number and seat number, then passed through x-ray and the metal detector. Several members of the group had wheelchairs.” For future reference, families were given cards with a number to call to arrange for a TSA employee to accompany them through security at O’Hare. The TSA employees were all volunteers.

The group was greeted at the gate by two pilots who posed with each of them for photos. One of the pilots took a shine to Mitch and made him a gift of his pilot cap and uniform jacket. “This hat has traveled the world for 30 years,” he said, “but it’s yours if I can have my picture taken with you.”

Once on board the plane—which was filled to capacity— it was all business. Seat belts, flight instructions and attendants “coming through with refreshments.” The plane taxied around the entire airport for about half an hour, then the pilots asked those interested in visiting the cockpit to wait behind. “Mitch wanted to fly the plane!” says Brian. “So they let him push a button that made noise, and he felt like he was flying the plane!”

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