



Wings for All® Takes the Fear Out of Flying

On Saturday, October 20, nearly 50 children and adults with special needs, along with adult companions, braved high winds and the season's first trace of snow to attend the first Wings for All® event hosted by Dane County Regional Airport in Madison, Wisconsin. Wings for All®/Wings for Autism® is a nationwide program sponsored by The Arc of the United States, designed to reduce travel stress for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities by introducing them to typical airport experiences. Chaired by Barbara Hughes, the event was spearheaded by The Arc chapters of Dane, Green and Richland Counties.

“Participants got a realistic taste of airport travel,” begins Barbara, Vice President of The Arc Dane County and a longtime member of the Special Needs Alliance. After checking in to receive their boarding passes, they navigated security alongside the general public. While waiting in the gate area before boarding a Delta-provided plane, participants had an opportunity to pose with the pilots in front of a huge screen shot of the cockpit.

Once aboard the plane, guests found their seat assignments, listened to the safety announcements, and had a chance to acclimate themselves to the sound of jet engines. They received Delta wings on deplaning.

Everyone loves a uniform. Kids couldn't wait to have their photos taken alongside the pilots.

“The airport arranged for two service dogs to be on hand, and the kids loved that,” says Barbara, “but we hosted adults with disabilities, too. One man in his late forties wants to be able to travel alone to visit family, and an advocate from the Autism Society of Wisconsin accompanied him before and after our event. He navigated the entire airport experience on his own, for the first time.”

The day was capped by a short reception at which County Executive Joe Parisi and State Assembly Representative Lisa Subeck both spoke to the participants and their families. Local author Mauro Magellan was on hand to autograph his book, *Felicia and the Rat*, which was included in gift bags that were handed out.

“Our volunteers were amazingly enthusiastic, working hard to make the day as anxiety-free and safe as possible for the families,” continues Barbara. “Two clinical faculty members from the University of Wisconsin's (UW) Department of Communication Disorders started from Wings for Autism® materials provided by the national office of The Arc and developed

a Wings for All® local airport “social story” and PowerPoint. These were sent ahead of time to family members to use in preparing the participants for what the day would have in store. The Director of Operations for The Arc Dane County, a former UW clinical faculty member and special education teacher, worked closely with the UW professors to prepare an outstanding volunteer training session right before the event.”

The day’s events were designed to make the airport experience less confusing and stressful.

The Delta flight crew actually “bid” to spend their free time working the event, and Communications Disorders UW students skipped their homecoming football game to help out.

All volunteers were trained on what to expect and how to handle the possibility that someone might be having a difficult day. TSA (Transportation Security Administration) sent many of its off-duty personnel to the training. “The UW professors explained, for instance, that many of the participants would be likely to have sensory issues, and they shared actual augmentative communication devices some participants might be using,” explains Barbara. “In many ways, the day was as much a learning experience for airport staff as it was for the participants.

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