WINGS FOR AUTISM LANDS AT PORTLAND INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT TO HELP FAMILIES PRACTICE AIR TRAVEL

News / Events / Festivals

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As the Alaska Airlines jet "touched down" at Portland International Airport at the end of a simulated flight, Warner Huff exclaimed, "Maybe next time we come, we could go a little higher!"

The 9-year-old Dallas girl was aboard the jet as part of the national Wings for Autism program, which held its first Portland event Saturday. Its goal: To give those with autism or other intellectual and developmental disabilities, plus their family members, a chance to practice taking a flight so they understand the process and know what to expect.

Portland International Airport welcomes **Wings for Autism** Families take a "practice" flight to help children understand **air travel** better.

The event, one of four Wings for Autism events throughout the country Saturday, drew more than 150 people, including Kathy and Scott Saylor of Milwaukie and their sons, Andrew, 9, and Michael, 7. Michael has autism.

"We haven't ridden on an airplane as a family," Kathy Saylor said. "One of our concerns is always how well (Michael) would do on an airplane, and so it's nice to have the opportunity to come and try it out and kind of help us troubleshoot, so we know, 'Oh, we need to plan for that better or do that different.' "

The Saylors and other families had the opportunity to go through a security screening, wait at their gate for their plane to arrive, board the jet and find their seats, and taxi down a runway. Squeals of delight filled the air as the plane accelerated and then decelerated.

Registration for the event filled within 24 hours, according to Tobi Burch Rates, executive director of the Autism Society of Oregon, which organized the event in partnership with the disability advocacy group The Arc of the United States.

"They contacted us in the spring -- I think it was before all the brouhaha with the United Airlines flight, but that certainly indicated how important it was to do," Rates said before the event, referring to a May incident in which a Tigard teenager with autism and her mother were removed from a Portland-bound plane.

Wings for Autism began in 2011 as a partnership among Boston's Logan International Airport, JetBlue, a Massachusetts autism support center and the Transportation Security Administration. Portland International Airport is the 21st airport to participate.

Kama Simonds, a spokeswoman for the Port of Portland, which operates the city's airport, said it frequently accommodates travelers with special needs. Saturday's event was a welcome opportunity to try a larger, coordinated effort with other agencies, she said. "Ultimately the goal is to have each and every traveler feel comfortable in our facility," she said.

Though the event was new to Portland, similar efforts have been held elsewhere in Oregon and the Northwest. According to Ray Prentice, Alaska Airlines' director of customer advocacy, the Seattle-based carrier has participated in two Wings for Autism events at the Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport; three at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, including one Saturday; one at Boise Airport; and two at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport. Spokane International Airport is scheduled to host Wings for Autism Oct. 17.

"We've found that we've changed people's lives with this event," Prentice said earlier this week.

He told of a parent who cried after one event because the family could finally fly between

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Washington and Texas for their annual summer vacation, after spending the past 15 years driving. An Oregon father wrote to thank Alaska for helping him evaluate whether his child was truly ready to fly, Prentice said.

The airline benefits, too, in that Wings for Autism helps employees understand air travel from the perspective of families experiencing autism, Prentice said. After attending one event, e-commerce staff added to the company website a section on "Developmental and Intellectual Disability Assistance" that includes a photo guide to using Sea-Tac. The Port of Portland has a similar guide on its website.

Saturday, Alaska employees were among about 25 event volunteers, who also included TSA employees such as Tawan Bernkopf, a member of the agency's Portland customer service team.

"Everybody on the team truly understands that it's so complex when you come into an airport," Bernkopf said earlier this week. "It brings us all great joy to be able to help these families who have a lot going on in their life."

Also volunteering was Logan Martin, who works for Huntleigh, an aviation security firm. Martin, who was stationed at the security checkpoint Saturday, said he has Asperger's.

"I'm glad that this event's going on," he said. "It touches me, that more stuff is being done. ... I struggled a year and a half to get this job and I'm grateful every day that I have it."

Wings for Autism operates with funding from the Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism and another, anonymous donor, as well as in-kind donations such as the use of jets and terminal space. The Portland event also received donated food from Burgerville.

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