>> Wally Tablit: Hello everyone and thank you for joining us today! My name is Wally Tablit and I am the Senior Director of Policy and Workforce Development here at RespectAbility. And today we continue to celebrate October as National Disability Employment Awareness Month, or NDEAM, with our employer spotlight series. And we are so honored and excited to have with us, my friend and colleague in this work, Steve Nelson, Senior Diversity Equity and Inclusion specialist with Alaska Airlines. Steve is a neurodivergent DEI professional with a Master of Science degree in organizational leadership, as well as professional certificates in diversity equity and inclusion for organizations and ethical leadership. For several years, Steve supported disability inclusion work at the Walt Disney World Resort near Orlando, Florida. Steve has also served as an independent disability inclusion consultant for museums, zoos, and hotels across the globe, as well as for the 2016 Invictus games in Orlando and the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Currently Steve leads the disability inclusion efforts at Alaska Airlines and Horizon Air as a senior member of the diversity equity and inclusion team. Quite the impressive resume, my friend!

>> Steve Nelson: Oh, well thank you. I'm honored to be here today, thank you Wally!

>> Wally Tablit: Well thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today Steve, I'm excited to have you share with all of us the work that you and Alaska Airlines are doing to create a more inclusive place for people with disabilities. Now, Steve and I met about, what, about a year and a half ago or so when I was at a previous organization. And Steve and I have continued to stay in touch and continue to follow the work that we do together, because not to quote High School Musical, but we are all in this together, so glad that you are here. So Steve we're going to start the conversation and thank you again for being here. Now it's my understanding that Alaska Airlines is pretty new to having an organized focus on disability inclusion. What was the spark, would you say, that led Alaska Airlines to start this conversation and that led to this work?

>> Steve Nelson: Well, Wally, thank you for the question, and I can tell you it it started -- the spark started long ago and it started within a business resource group that we have called Access, where our employees with disabilities and their allies would work together to bring up concerns to the company. And from that group, both a co-chair of that group and also the director of our customer advocacy that works with all of our guests facing incidents in communications and things Ray Prentiss, who has since retired, had a really big passion. And so he kind of took it on as his own little project that, you know, I want to push accessibility, I want to push disability inclusion. But it was kind of -- you know, he would do this -- and try to push this effort, and then we'd have, like, a guild form. We have -- tons of interest in the -- topic across the organization. So we have a social services guild over here that does this and then we have this -- you know, we have a internal disability advisory board. We have all these little groups that are kind of each on their own. So basically in the past, maybe, two years, we got a new director for diversity equity inclusion. And as part of his vision, he understood the importance that disability inclusion needs to live in the DEI space. It needs to be part of the corporate strategy. And so he was searching for somebody who could come onto the team who had that background of disability, which is how he ended up connecting with me and -- bringing me on board. And since then for the past over a year we've been really working hard to create something really special for Alaska and really the airline industry, I believe.

>> Wally Tablit: That's fantastic and thanks for sharing that because it is true, you know, I think unfortunately a lot of organizations have made a commitment to diversity equity inclusion, but they forget or don't think about adding disability to that conversation. Yeah. And we know disability intersects with all of that, with every other lived experience and identity, and I think that's fantastic. You know, I myself identify as a gay Asian man with a disability, and I'm an immigrant, and so those are those components that we talk about, so fantastic, exciting to hear that. So you know Steve, with the theme of this year's NDEAM being "disability: part of the equity equation," I want to share with everyone that this is your first year participating in Disability:IN's Diversity Equity Inclusion index. And for those people listening who don't know what Disability:IN is, Disability:IN is the leading non-profit resource for business disability inclusion worldwide. And with their Disability:IN's index, Alaska Airlines got a perfect score. I mean, that's pretty damn impressive. So can you share with all of us the culture and programs that Alaska Airlines implemented, beyond the things that you shared, that led to this amazing accomplishment, because not many people get that score, especially in their first year.

>> Steve Nelson: Right, yeah, thank you for that. You know, and -- I'll say, you know, for those watching, you know, 100 percent, it's great, it sounds great, and it is, but that doesn't mean that you're done. You know, there's so much more work to do. And what I love about the disability equality index is it gives you kind of this benchmark to show you, here's all the areas you're really great at, and then here's where, you know, you compare with the industry on these other items. So it helps us to create a strategy for the future. Some of the big things that happened in this first year was -- first off, it -- the survey is very intensive, and I was completing the survey on our behalf. It takes a -- it takes a very long time to do in connecting with a lot of different work groups. And I was able to jump into some of our processes to see where, you know, there were things that, just, nobody noticed because there wasn't a disability inclusion function, and when you don't have the employee base necessarily in certain buildings that have disabilities that don't raise it to your attention. So for instance, I looked at our evacuation policies. And today our new policy doesn't list specifically what to do if somebody is a wheelchair user and isn't going to be taking the stairs, you know, where do they go? What's the process? And we started to notice that in our newer buildings, that's there, but in our much older buildings, they're still using a policy that was written years and years ago. So contact the policy team, we immediately changed the policy. I can tell you that anytime I found something that needed to be changed, there was no pushback from anybody. It didn't matter what type of legwork it would take to get things changed, they would do it.

>> Wally Tablit: Yeah, yeah.

>> Steve Nelson: Another big thing is, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic -- or I should say coming out of maybe the worst part of it -- one thing we started to recognize is that mental health is -- really a key focus, and it needs to be a bigger focus than what we already have, because we were basically providing the kinds of benefits you'd find in any major company. And so we started a new business resource group, Thrive, that focuses on mental well-being and self-care. We started what we call the Care retreat, which is for all employees, and they go, and there's, you know, essential oils and there's learning, and there's meditation, and just a lot of little things we were doing. You know, we did a temporary kind of membership program into -- you had a choice of Headspace or Masterclass or different programs like that. That was something that really helped elevate our score, because they were looking for ways that you go kind of above and beyond when it comes to providing benefits. And you know, I was thinking these were just things that we were doing just to be, you know, I guess better, more inclusive, more caring. And then as I was filling out the survey and putting this in, the score just kept kind of bumping up. So I said, "oh, well, this is -- good, so see, this was good that we invested in it and now we can put even more resources into that area."

>> Wally Tablit: Very cool. And you know, like you said, there's -- more work to be done, always, right? No matter -- you can -- you can easily say, "oh, we're fantastic, yeah," you know, "hooray for us." And I think sometimes -- you know, I've been doing disability work for over 25 years, and I think whenever you reach a milestone, you have to ask, right, what's next? And you know -- and I'm glad you shared that Steve, because even with a perfect score and it sounded like it was quite the process, I'm sure -- like, you've shared that Alaska Airlines always wants to continue to doing better. I think all of us in this work want to continue to do better. What are some exciting next steps would you say are in your disability journey?

>> Steve Nelson: So we have a few really exciting things. First of all, for those who are participating today, listening, you may have heard that there is a lot of change happening when it comes to law that services individuals with disabilities in air travel. And this is -- this is huge, because for anybody with -- especially the more severe disabilities, or who might, for instance, be a full-time wheelchair user, or any number of other things, know that air travel is extremely challenging, especially compared to other forms of transportation. So, passenger Bill of Rights came out. We've already been in discussions with Boeing about the future of what a cabin is going to look like, and how do we make it more accessible, not just for a wheelchair user, but how about a blind passenger? How about a deaf-blind passenger? That's a community that -- I think is often overlooked. But two big things happening outside of that. First, we recently partnered with Open Doors, and they are going to do a first in the industry complete accessibility audit for us. It's an eight-month process. And we're going to audit everything that we own or lease, any property that our corporate real estate team would own or lease, and they're going to check everything from, you know, the spacing of a sanction, to the type of flooring you're using, everything -- parking lot. And they're going to create for us the accessible field guide that tells you here's where you are, here's what you need to do, here's better, here's best. And this way we have this guide to say when we're building new things and we're updating, we always want to aim for at least better, and if we can do it, best, in not just what the law is saying. It has to be up to one of these other standards. So this is something super exciting in -- what Eric Lipp from Open Doors has told me is this is -- we're the first major airline to do it. The other thing that I believe we're one of the first airlines, if not the first, is our DEI team. We are officially expanding and forming our DEI office of disability. And it is a true office of disability. I will lead the office. We will bring in disability inclusion specialists to staff the office. And they'll be the subject matter expert that connects. I told you earlier we have all these groups -- I mean, all working in the company and they all have the passion. This is going to be kind of that central nucleus that all of that goes through. These specialists, myself, will guide that work, will help prioritize when something needs more money. We sit in corporate so we will go advocate for it with our executive leaders, and we'll push -- we'll -- you know we have -- you know, we're going to work with our accommodations team because, you know, what happens with accommodations is you say, "oh well yes, disability a -- we always put them in this job." So we're going to help them to see where else, what else can we do. You know, we're not limited to this box. Yes for the airline industry, yes, there are going to be parameters. You know, not everyone can fly an airplane. But that doesn't mean that everybody has to do job A or job B. That means maybe we can be creative. So we're going to help make those connections and be advocates for all of our employees. And we're super excited, it rolls out next year. Hopefully the job will post soon for our disability inclusion specialist, so very very very excited to have this coming.

>> Wally Tablit: And for those people -- who are listening and don't know -- who Open Doors is or what Open Doors does, if you could share a little bit about Open Doors?

>> Steve Nelson: So Open Doors is a non-profit organization. And I would say they're one of the leaders in the country when it comes to accessible built spaces. That's really kind of their bread and butter, but they do more than that. So Eric Lipp, who is their CEO, their leader, he's a full-time wheelchair user. So -- and they're a disability owned business, but they go into places like airports, for instance, they work with ports and they help to establish not just consistent experiences across the airports, but to make sure that they truly are accessible. But beyond that they also help with things like ramp training, so those agents that are responsible for handling luggage and, more importantly, handling people's wheelchairs or other mobility aids. They help to train, like, what does that look like, how do you handle it. They help to advocate for things like lifts so that people aren't having to carry, you know, four or five hundred pound wheelchairs downstairs. And they help to develop other types of training too, so they're really well connected in the disability built space. I was familiar with them for many years before even coming over to Alaska.

>> Wally Tablit: Well and fantastic -- and to that point, you know, it's -- one of the things for -- any organization or company or business that wants to continue to do this work and, like you said, be good, better, or best, there are so many resources and partners and collaborations and conversations that could be had, you know? If you have a specialist like yourself or myself who are doing this work, there's always going to be someone who can help us be better, who can help us continue that momentum. You know -- and to your previous comments Steve, it's exciting to hear -- I think sometimes when people hear disability, especially when we look at the the images that are portrayed. It's -- people in a wheelchair, or people who might, you know, use a cane or a guide dog. But disability is so many layers and so many facets. And I love that Alaska is looking to to include everyone, and there's more, like you said, when we think about that, when we talk about people who come -- and travel with personal care attendants or support, when we look at some of the dietary needs that might happen. And I think the kind of conversation that Alaska is starting and continue to have is super exciting. I myself am an Alaska mileage plan member, so props to that. I continue to support the people who continue to support and do the great work. So you know, we talked about organizations and businesses. And Alaska Airlines, like all businesses, we understand this, must make decisions that are in the best interest of the company. And one way I like to think about this is to say that -- companies -- and with my experience in supported employment for so many years -- companies need a business case for their actions. What would you say is the business case that Alaska Airlines has used and continues to use for including people with disabilities in your talent pool, like you said, creating this new role, putting that out there. What is the business case for Alaska to be part of this work and movement?

>> Steve Nelson: I think this is exactly why it's so important for companies to bake this into their DEI group and their DEI strategy, because it's the same type of strategy that we're using for -- for all other areas of DEI. And that's that our passengers have disabilities. Those people who fly with us, those people we want to fly with us, they have disabilities, and we want them to see themselves reflected in the employee base.

>> Wally Tablit: Right.

>> Steve Nelson: We also pride ourselves as being -- our community, the Seattle hometown airline. So we want to make sure we're taking care of our local community too, and we understand that in Seattle, there are numerous individuals with disabilities, and there's many that are unemployed. There are those who struggle to find meaningful employment, affordable, you know -- employment that's going to pay them well enough to afford housing and other basic needs, medical care. So we want to make sure that we're providing them a place that they can come to. And we really want individuals -- everybody to know that, you know, working for an airline is more than going on an airplane. You know, it's not just being a flight attendant or a pilot. If you're interested in IT, if you're interested in marketing, communications, we have all of that. You know, HR -- we're like any other big company, except also we fly planes. So if you are into travel, you get that great benefit to jump on a plane and fly somewhere. If you're not into it, then great, you could still be part of the the great culture. So that's how we've been pushing it, is saying, you know, really, we want all of our passengers, we want our community, we want them to be involved. And so disability is a big piece of that. I will also say, and you know, no need to keep it hidden, but as an airline we are a federal contractor. So we do have certain federal obligations too. We have affirmative action plan goals. And that can be helpful. Now I'll say again: the current leadership -- and I've only been here just over a year -- nobody in the current leadership is anti-disability inclusion. Our CEO has already signed on to the Disability:IN CEO to CEO letter.

>> Wally Tablit: Wonderful.

>> Steve Nelson: He works with Airlines for America which is this organization, all of these major airlines come together and focus on the future. And a big part of that is accessibility, especially things like accessible laboratories on planes. So he has a huge passion. But it doesn't hurt that as a federal contractor, we have some federal obligation as well. Because just in case anybody comes in who might be a little iffy, you can always lead in -- I always say, you know, the law can be our friend. I don't like to -- I don't like to lean too much into the law, but -- you know, I like to think more about -- we'll do what's right, but we can always use the law to start the conversation and then move into the bigger picture.

>> Wally Tablit: Exactly. Those laws and those requirements inform the decisions we make, and I think that's, you know, and I think that's really important to say what is the things that we are expected or mandated to do, but how can we improve -- how do we continue to have those movements. I love that you shared, Steve, about how Alaska and you are looking at what do we want this place to become, how is it reflecting our community, and I think that's really important, you know, as we do -- you do the DEI work. I sit in that space as well, and I know for me as a gay Asian man, there's not a lot of people who look like me in this work. And so when we celebrate that -- we want to -- I love that you are allowing people to go where they are celebrated and not tolerated for their authenticity. And this is not specific to disability, but we know disability intersects with many things. And I've shared before that I am a gay man. And I know Alaska and you have done some work with the LGBTQ+ community and some of those things to advance that conversation. Can you share, because when we first met, you shared some of the things you were doing, I was so impressed with that, and if you could share some of the things you've done around that work in that community?

>> Steve Nelson: So with the LGBTQ community, there's -- so so much that we're focused on. So both my director and myself are part of the LGBTQ community, so we definitely have personal connections. But we also have a very strong business resource group here. And again, the business resource group is key. It's called Pride crew and it's just incredible. We were just celebrating coming out day the other day, and just a really beautiful presentation that was done for the entire organization. Some of the work we've been doing, really, we've been focusing a lot on the experience for our transgender employees, and employees who are transitioning. So one of the first projects I did actually when I came to Alaska, I was probably -- I was probably here for four weeks or so, but I developed a transition guidance, is what I call it. It's a multi-page packet that basically helps both the individual who is transitioning and their leaders, their allies, their co-workers, to understand what this means. So there's tools for the individual who's transitioning. This is -- how you will change your identification through our systems. Again, federal type of program, so there's -- a lot of little things that have to be changed. This is how you do it. It makes it very easy so that there's no confusion, there's no fear. This is what our uniform policy is, just so you know. And for example, we've made sure things like you don't have to legally change your sex identification or name or any of that in order to be able to wear the uniform that matches your identity. So there are some grooming guidelines that go with each type of uniform, but anybody can choose any uniform at this point. And we're developing some things in the future to make the uniform even more inclusive, which we're excited about, but I've come to learn in that work I don't come from the fashion industry, but I'm going to learn it. It's a long process. There's a lot of steps, so I'd love for it all to happen tomorrow, but it's going to be a little ways out. But this transition guidance -- it also helps those individuals with questions, who are, you know, I don't understand, what is this? Well here's a bunch of tools, here's resources, here's websites, here's people you can talk to to understand, here's how you have conversations. So that's a really big thing that we've been working on. We also work closely with HRC. You know, we're always -- we're a big donor to HRC and to everything that HRC does, but we also, again, we do the HRC survey and use that as our Benchmark to see where do we need to do better. One of those things is benefits for same-sex couples that are not married. And I was someone who experienced that, you know, first coming into the company -- now I'm married, at the time I wasn't. I, you know, we were partners or, you know, whatever you want to call it in the -- legal sense, but found that benefits were really kind of strange. You know, there had to be an official marriage. Well for anyone who's in the community knows that's not always so easy, even though marriage is legal, a lot of things -- there's culture there's family, there's everything. So maybe that's not something that's in the immediate future, so we've been working. We've expanded benefits coverage, we've changed the way that language is, so that, you know, there doesn't have to be the marriage necessarily. And of course, again, sometimes the federal thing steps in. So there may be little changes here and there, but the idea is to make it as inclusive as possible without putting restrictions that are kind of heteronormative and they don't really match the uniqueness of the community.

>> Wally Tablit: Right. Well you know, and thanks for showing that, because I think the most recent data shows that nearly 40 percent of the LGBTQ+ community identify as having a disability, and that is a large number. And I think when we do continue the work, when we look at including disability into the conversation of DEI, especially with the theme of this year's NDEAM, you know, equity and all that work, we continue to -- to learn these lessons of how we include disability in the conversation. And with that in mind, what would you say are some of the lessons that you and Alaska Airlines has learned by doing this work, by starting the journey, and all of the continued movements that you -- that you've been doing?

>> Steve Nelson: Is the question -- I'm sorry -- specifically disability employment, or --

>> Wally Tablit: Yeah, and just in general, in terms of -- to disability work, because obviously you've included disability to that, what are some of the lessons you've learned from the audit you've been doing, from the Disability:IN index, from the conversation as you start looking at some of the ways that you could improve, and maybe even conversations with other, you know, community-based organizations or people who do the disability work, working with Open Doors, what are some of the things that you've kind of went, "aha" or epiphanies or moments to reflect, if you will.

>> Steve Nelson: I would say one of the big things I think -- I think we're learning as an organization is that becoming more accessible isn't necessarily very cost heavy.

>> Wally Tablit: Right.

>> Steve Nelson: Some cases, sure, especially when you think of some of our buildings from the early 1970s might need a little more work than others, but a lot of things are low to no cost. And we've started to see that. And especially our corporate real estate partners, you know, individuals who, when I first came to them and started talking about how we should expand on accessibility, there was a lot of kind of, well, oh, "what will it cost?" And "we didn't budget," and you know, "we don't have --" "we're not one of the really big Airlines, so we don't have that much money coming in." But then as they start to look at these things, oh, "well this we can just do it right now." You know, "oh, one of our buildings, it's just all the coffee rooms everything's really stored up high, oh, well we'll just bring everything down, and we'll just close off those cabinets --"

>> Wally Tablit: Yeah, go figure. Yeah.

>> Steve Nelson: Oh, you know, putting a button at this bathroom to open it, it really doesn't cost very much to do that, we'll do that. And -- and that even leads into some other, you know, maybe non-disability specific, but gender neutral restrooms -- started to find ways that, oh, wow, we can just take off the signs, and put a thing that says, you know, there's this number of urinals, this number stalls, and then there you go, it's gender neutral, yes. Very easy! So -- I think we're starting to see that things -- things are easy, and I think what our leadership is learning, and our employees in general who may be new on their journey, is that it doesn't hurt to ask, courageous conversations are good, and this is anything DEI but especially when it comes to accessibility, disability, if there's an employee who has self-identified and they are open and they want to tell you, again, we're not going to force them into anything, but if somebody comes up and says listen you know I have autism, you can say, okay, "what does that mean? What can I do? What should we do? What does it mean for us? Is there something we need to say or do or act?" Don't be afraid to ask, because those individuals who work there with you, they are the expert in their own disability. You know, you can come to me -- you know, I am on the autism spectrum, I have other unseen disabilities. So I can help a little bit, but my story is not the same as everybody else. So you know, ask your person, find out what's -- what they want. If they have the trust in you to come forward and tell you about it, then that means they're willing to have a little bit of a conversation. So those are the key things. It's -- conversations are important, they're -- so fruitful, that feedback's a gift, and then just, it's not going to cost as much as you're thinking, so do it. And you know, where it does cost, it's going to help everybody. I mentioned our building -- 1970, our corporate headquarters, there's no elevator on one side of the building. So there's a -- there's a whole section you can't access. And it's a big project to put in an elevator. We are looking at the feasibility of it. Again, there hasn't been much pushback, which is surprising, but but good, positive. But I came in thinking, oh, these, you know, people are going to be like, this could be so expensive and a big project, but they said, you know what, let's look at it. But we said, you know, if you put the elevator in, we're not just talking wheelchair users, people with limited mobility -- everybody. I mean, when are you coming in and your hands are full, you don't want to take the stairs, plus you know, disability -- guess what -- anybody can end up with a disability, you know, today. So maybe today you're running up and down those stairs, tomorrow you might wish you had an elevator. So this helps everybody.

>> Wally Tablit: Right. Fantastic and it's -- to your point, it's so true in terms of -- I think when people start that there's this assumption of what it's going to be and what it's going to cost, when really, it could be these simple things. So you've already shared some wonderful lessons and some advice, if you will. And we know that truly including disability in the equity equation is about building a culture and how you create that space. So I'm sure there are other companies and other businesses watching and listening who are so impressed, as I am, with what you and Alaska Airlines have accomplished and wondering how they can be involved. You've shared a little bit of some advice and lessons that you would share, but what other advice or other pieces of tidbits of information if you will, would you give another company that is wrestling with the question of how do I start this, if I start this, what does this look like? So what would you share with those other companies and organizations that want to start this journey of disability inclusion?

>> Steve Nelson: So the first thing I'll say -- I'm gonna -- parrot back something I've already said, but business resource group. Look at -- your employees. Give your employees a voice. If you don't have the tools for a business resource group, maybe you haven't had business resource groups, you can do an affinity group. You can do a club, you know, let's get, you know, people with disabilities and allies, people who are interested, let's all get together, let's talk. And you'll see what comes out of that conversation. Because no matter who you do -- you can talk to a consultant, you could -- you might know and you walk around, there's gonna be things that you're gonna miss that your employees are going to know. And they're the ones that live it and are going to come out and say, well you know, "yeah, all this looks great, okay, but guess what? When we put luggage here, suddenly there's not enough space anymore for me to get through on my wheelchair. So today it looks fine, but that's not what it normally looks like." And then you realize, okay, so we need to move that. So that's -- that's very important. The other thing I'll say is, you know, we live in an age where information is at your fingertips so Google Google. Do your research. There's so many great places you can go online to find information, and most of it free. You know, you don't necessarily have to join an organization like Disability:IN to get information, a lot of it is out there for you. There's a lot of organizations that will help. And that way you can learn. But another key thing I want to tell to employers out there is think big picture. When it comes to individuals with disabilities, one of the biggest things I've seen as I've consulted with companies is they stick to the letter of the law, they stick to ADA. ADA - Americans with Disabilities Act - tells me I have to do this. I've done it, box checked, we're done. And where that hurts is -- you bring in employees, great, I brought in all of these neurodivergent employees, autism, and there's all these different things, and this is all great. I put them in, they're working in the front line operation, great. Okay, are you developing those employees? Have you forgotten those employees are there, because remember, individuals with disabilities, maybe -- just like with other dimensions of diversity in minority groups -- maybe they don't have access to same kinds of education or tools or resources. So if you have that at your company, if you have leadership development -- we just launched what we call the leadership academy that teaches you all these great leadership skills. You know, if you have something like that, identify those employees and encourage them to go through these development programs and advocate and champion for them so that they can go up the ranks and join your leadership, because you want -- these individuals with disability, you want them all around your company. You want them in your leadership, because they're going to help you make those really big decisions. They're going to help you think a little differently, you know. I'll tell you, maybe I'm -- you know -- I'm partial but, you know, you bring in somebody with a little neurodiversity and they might be able to make you think a different way, because we think differently. So you know, don't forget your employees. Don't just bring them in and leave them and and forget it, and that's the biggest thing I think happens.

>> Wally Tablit: Wonderful. And to that point, like you said, engage with the conversation. Adding someone new to the conversation can by nature change the conversation and inform so much. Steve, it's been wonderful connecting with you and seeing you, and congratulations on your recent wedding and nuptials by the way. But thank you so much for sharing all of your insights and the wonderful things that Alaska Airlines is doing. And for everyone watching and listening, continue to support the movement, have conversations if you are a business owner. You know, engage, research -- I think it's that intentional movements and actions that we do to make sure that equity is not just a word, but it is an action. This is not a monument, it is a movement. So thank you so much Steve, it's a pleasure to chat with you today, and have a great day everyone. Thank you!