

Of Mice and Men and Flying to Belfast: Planning is everything

By Jennifer Harrison

This is a true story. Do not attempt at home. It may not end well.

Ours is not a traveling family. Not for lack of desire, per se, but a combination of time deficiencies and funds earmarked less for wanderlust and more for HVAC breakdowns. But there was this one time - long enough ago for the sting to have dissipated but not so long to have faded from memory and mockery - that I planned a holiday in Belfast for my younger daughter and me. Excuses be cursed, we were two gals ready to get our corned-beef-and-cabbage in the historic city.

Now, I am an excellent savings-getter so our hotel was flawlessly Good Enough. The Weather Channel has an excellent app, and so we packed to perfection. The plane was... well, the main character of this story.

Our flight was scheduled for 5:30 on a Thursday evening. We live about 1/2 hour from Newark. My husband's gas tank was hovering around the F mark. All systems were go.

So, we piled into the car around 3:30 that afternoon and set off for the airport. This is roughly how the conversation went from there.

My husband: What terminal are we headed to?

Me (consulting the itinerary): 8.

My husband: 8? Newark doesn't have a terminal 8.

Me (consulting the itinerary again): Maybe it's a B?

My husband: Well, IS it a B?

Me (trying to focus on the itinerary through tears): No. It's an 8.

The car went silent.

That's because while Newark Airport does not have a terminal 8, JFK airport in Queens, nearly an hour and a half away without traffic - and there's always traffic - does. And that's where we were meant to head.

I have made these mistakes before in various situations and under sundry circumstances. And it was never for lack of planning. It was for poor planning, insufficient planning, and planning executed with only one pair of (poor and insufficient) eyes. Because even though we may try to dot all the i's and cross all the t's and discern all the 8's from B's, we can't always be sure we've done so. And that's why help helps.

Which brings us to PFAL and the importance of planning... with a plan.

When it comes to bridging the gap between childhood and adulthood with a child with developmental disabilities, planning for adult life can mean laying the groundwork for post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, gaining adult services, and independent living/community participation. And while there are several age restrictions to filing government paperwork, getting a jump on things is always a good idea. Delaying this process can mean fewer choices for higher education, career paths, or personal development; last-minute decisions, increased stress, and a feeling of being overwhelmed as students approach adulthood; students potentially missing out on opportunities to develop critical life skills such as budgeting, time management, and/or self-advocacy; or gaps in education and work experience that may affect students' competitiveness in the job market or their readiness for further education. Like knowing the correct airport terminal - or airport itself - knowing where you're heading is often as important as getting there.

So what does planning look like?

It looks like working with your school's transition team and support services to get an IEP in place that best reflects your child's strengths, wants, and needs.

It looks like understanding the income and services resources like SSI, Medicaid, and DDD and making sure that the timelines are firmly planted in your brain and calendar. (For your DDD timeline, scroll up and check out the flyers!)

It looks like thinking hard about the future and whether it should include full guardianship, partial guardianship, or an alternative that will give your student the most independence and least restrictive environment for them.

It also looks like getting excited for the future. Yes, it comes with anxiety - the future tends to do that - but it is also the brilliant next phase, filled with big steps and baby steps and all the steps in between that deserve to be celebrated.

Finally, planning looks like support. And that's where Planning for Adult Life and the other incredible programs at The Arc of NJ come into play.

Children's Advocacy

Criminal Justice Advocacy

The Family Institute

Healthcare Advocacy

Project Hire

And The New Jersey Self-Advocacy project

We are all here to help.

My daughter and I managed to make our plane that evening with only a couple of amber (they were amber!) lights run, but the lesson lives on. Because, as we've learned, the best laid plans...