

The True Story Of Two Difficult Guests - By Doug Kennedy

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As a hospitality industry trainer, I've often said there's no such thing as difficult guests; just nice people going through rough spots in life. Here's a recent true story to demonstrate...

It was early morning; too early. Yet after only 90 minutes of sleep I awoke immediately, and as I headed down to the lobby shortly to catch the hotel van, I was grateful to have at least made it back to my home state of Florida. It had been a very long night on the road.

The day before had been a good one, and as I pulled into the rental car lot at the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton airport as the sun was setting, my mind filled with pleasant thoughts of my just-completed workshops on hospitality excellence. Upon approaching the airline counter I was so relieved to see that my flight home to Ft. Lauderdale - through Philly - was on time! While I'm always anxious to get back home, an especially important duty awaited me the next morning - I was scheduled to report promptly at 8:45am to chaperone my son's second grade class on their long-anticipated field trip to Butterfly World!

Now this would be important for any parent, but my participation was even more critical, as our school district requires that all field trips include either a male teacher, or at least one parent-volunteer who has passed a Level-Two security clearance, complete with a fingerprinting and a background check. So not only was I wanting to come through for my own son, but also for the seven teachers and 140-plus second graders who were counting on me, since I am currently the only male parent-volunteer with the necessary credentials and able to fulfill the credentials required for compliance.

Things were still going well as I settled into a spot at the snack bar just outside of the security gate. After ordering, I called my son Adam at his mom's house and reminded him that Daddy would be there when it was time to board that bus the next morning; he sounded thrilled! It was all downhill from there. Not seconds after hanging up and re-checking the monitor, I noticed that my departure had been moved back by one hour. Knowing there was to be snow and freezing rain moving into Philly, I checked my connection time but then breathed a sigh of relief in that I would still have 55 minutes to change planes.

Later, I finished my beer and headed through security. Waiting at the gate, I called my wife and told her I'd still be home on time, but while we were talking the flight was pushed back another 15 minutes. Although the gate agent assured me that I would still make it, I opted to empower myself and went online to USAirways.com.

One good thing about living in Florida is that it is served by three major airports, including Miami and West Palm along with Ft. Lauderdale, and even Naples is an option at only a 90 minute drive. In checking though I soon found that all of these flights were running on time out of Philly, so if my connection didn't leave soon I'd miss them all.

As my posted departure pushed back another 15 minutes, it was clear I would miss connecting to any of the South Florida flights. Desperate, my mind searched for alternatives, such as taking a morning flight home from Philly, but that would get me to the school four hours too late. Finally, remembering that Southwest Airlines provided almost hourly service morning service from Orlando, I found a connection there that was delayed by 90 minutes! It took some convincing back at the desk, plus a little pleading, and I was just about to downright beg when the USAirways agent agreed to rebook me on that flight.

Readers will be spared the monotony of my airport wait, and it will suffice to stay that although I made my connection in Philly, I finally touched down in Orlando about 2:30am, six hours and fifteen minutes before I was due at the school, which was a four hour drive or a one hour flight out of reach. Having booked a room at a very reputable hotel nearby, I at least managed to grab 90 minutes of sleep, a shower, and a fresh shave, and was ready to present myself on time as a fairly respectable parent-volunteer.

We are now back to the beginning of my story, and I was filled with increased optimism of making this field trip against all odds as I headed down to the lobby to catch the hotel van that morning. I'd booked a 6:55am departure, and if it was on time I'd be landing just after 8am, and since I was carrying on bags, if traffic cooperated I'd have exactly enough time to report for duty as scheduled at 8:45am.

That's when I passed by the TV in the lobby bar, where the CNN newscaster was talking about the current tornado warning in Central Florida, and breaking headline news about a series of deadly tornados that had struck moments before just 20 miles away from where I stood. Yet for me it was not the fear of deadly twisters that caused my anxiety at that moment; but rather the fear of more delays causing me to disappoint my Adam and his classmates and teachers. One can imagine that all of this caused me more than a little anxiety when I boarded the airport courtesy van, so I was glad to see it wasn't busy and we wouldn't have to stop at many concourses since the other two passengers were flight attendants.

Having myself driven the hotel airport courtesy van as one of my first jobs nearly two decades earlier for this same hotel chain I was staying with, upon boarding I was a bit surprised to find the driver had left the radio blasting. I was also a bit surprised when one of the flight attendants moved towards the empty driver's seat and turned the radio off, saying to her seatmate and I 'It's way too early for that.' While this did seem a bit aggressive, I have to admit that I too was enjoying the silence she restored, while I contemplated the thunderstorm's storm's track and how it might impact my flight. After several minutes the driver returned without a word or greeting, and we collectively began our silent, peaceful journey to the airport.

Right about the time I felt my optimism returning the driver turned the radio back on to the same radio station, just as loud as before, jarring me back to the reality of the lightening out the window. At this point the same flight attendant piped-up in a firm but polite tone and said 'If you don't mind, it's a little too early for that right now.' Now I am a fan of all music genres and admit myself enjoying listening to that same station occasionally when I'm in Orlando, I have to say I agreed my fellow hotel guest at this moment in time.

Right as I'm thinking all of this the young man turned the volume down only slightly, so I was not surprised when the same guest spoke up again saying 'If you don't mind we'd really prefer to have it off.' To my amazement, the driver responded by saying, 'Hmm, well I see we got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, didn't we?' turning the volume down slightly further.

Usually, I try to mind my own business on the road and to avoid confrontations at any cost, but in this case I felt compelled to say '**I believe the lady asked for the radio to be off right now.**' This comment ended further dialogue with the driver, who complied with our request, and whom I'm sure spent the rest of that airport run thinking about the two difficult, cranky guests he'd ended up with in the van this morning.

But my remarks also broke the ice with that flight attendant, who I'm sure appreciated me sticking up for her. She asked where I was departing to and I reciprocated by politely asking what flights she was working that day.

As we drove on through the rain as I listened she explained how she was working an international flight and had just found out hours before her mother had passed away unexpectedly. As an only child, she added, it fell on her to make all the arrangements for this unplanned and unexpected funeral, and that she first had to get back home to London to pick up some documents and then had to make it to Sidney, Australia, hopefully within the same calendar day.

After my van-mate's comment, all of my worries and anxieties were lifted. Funny also that about then the lightening stopped, the rain slowed and before long I was through security and onboard my flight home to Ft. Lauderdale, which thankfully took off on time despite the tornado warning.

Not long after, having landed on time without a minute to spare, I found myself walking up to the school entrance at the exact moment that three yellow school buses pulled up to collect our second graders. There was my Adam breaking ranks from his class line and running towards me for his usual bear hug, which I knew by then to brace myself for. Yet even as our fun-filled day progressed, I couldn't help but thinking back to that other 'cranky' guest I'd met that morning on the hotel van, and hoping that she, too, would be hugging someone from her family very, very soon.

I wondered also about that van driver, and what his thoughts might have been about his two seemingly 'cranky' guests, who really just wanted to ride to the airport in quiet contemplation in the early morning rain.

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