

Martyn Sibley podcast

Part 1

Martyn 0:00

Accessibility is important to us, so if you'd like to listen along with subtitles, you can find a link to the transcript of the episode.

Martyn 00:16

Hi, I'm Martin Sibley. Really been amazing to talk about my passions of travel and entrepreneurship and that's why today I'm chatting with my good friend Josh Wintersgill, who I remember meeting, first ever time I'm gonna say, seven, eight years ago, roughly.

Martyn 00:45

And yeah, Josh and I connected on those, those two topics and lots of other things, obviously both having SMA, as well and we just haven't stopped talking since and it's a nice opportunity to share our story and our conversations with you today.

Martyn 01:04

So Josh, we get to talk about our two big passions, that being travel and entrepreneurship, a beautiful crossover and I thought it'd be a really nice way to kick off just to hear a bit from you around, I guess, kind of where the passion for travel started, and we can obviously look into entrepreneurship and business a little bit after. But I'd love just to hear your experiences of travel, the good, the bad, the ugly as well.

Josh 1:33

Yeah, do you know what I think it's been what, a year and a half since we last did a podcast, it's nice to get back and do this type of stuff. So yeah, thanks. Thanks for having us.

Josh 1:42

I mean, yeah, travel for me started, well, ever since I was a kid. I've always been interested in aviation. I think my granddad used to have these like, these quirky little like World War books with like loads of different models of German and Russian, American and British aircraft and I was always quite fascinated by it.

Josh 2:02

And then there was like, lots of books around commercial aircraft as well, and I think I also had quite a fascination for kind of World War, which is a bit weird growing up as a kid. I've just always been fascinated by the RAF as well. So growing up I always wanted to be an RAF pilot and obviously, you know with our condition, it became quite apparent that being an RAF pilot wasn't actually going to be a realistic goal.

Josh 2:25

And Nan used to take us as kids up to the airport. I was just in my element, right? I was just sat there eating sandwiches watching planes take off. Yeah, ever since a young age, I've always been interested in aviation generally and then combine that with kind of travelling as a kid with SMA, with Nan and stuff going to Tenerife quite a lot. I think that just kind of kick started my interest in travel, I suppose.

Martyn 2:50
Amazing.

Josh 2:51
So there you go.

Martyn 2:52
Two more similarities, I also had, I wouldn't say weird actually, but I had a strong obsession with World War Two when I was growing up. So there's definitely another thing that I hadn't totally known you were so into it as well. And Tenerife, as you do know, is one of my big places visited. But it's interesting as well, your passion was around the almost like, the act of flying as much as going to another destination.

Martyn 3:19
Like for me, it was very much about wanting that bit of warm sunshine in the winter, loving going to new places, and I'm sure all that resonates with you as well. But I just thought that was quite interesting that for you, the actual planes, and the actual act of flying is something that you're very interested in and passionate about.

Martyn 3:40
Looking at the challenges that we face as people with SMA, I think it's pretty obvious to say flying is one of them. But like just generally speaking, when you used to go to Tenerife, when you travel now, for work, for leisure, it'd be great just to kind of quantify and just give a bit of texture around the things that you find most challenging.

Josh 4:03
I think since sort of like when you're younger, you're obviously, you're much lighter, much more mobile in some respects, depending on where you're at in your SMA journey, I suppose. And there was, certainly when I was sort of five or six years of age, there was a lot less to think about it was just a case of, you know, I could I could kind of stumble my way onto a plane and I didn't you know, Nan or family didn't really have to worry about kind of lifting me onto a plane at that point.

Josh 4:29
And obviously as I've grown older, and the condition deteriorating, it got to the point where Nan then started carrying me onto a plane, and then you get full circle to the point of being required to then be too big to be lifted. So you, then obviously, you need to go on to an aircraft using an aid, that's kind of, that's when you start realising how reliant you are on the support services

provided by the industry to help you get on and off an aircraft. If you're not traveling with an army of family or PAs and other things, you are at the mercy of them to provide you that support.

Josh 5:02

And it's not until you kind of start experiencing that you realise kind of how much you are thrown into the deep end, and at the mercy of others trying to help you and you soon kind of realise that there's a big, a big flaw with a lot of it in terms of how the industry supports those that need a lot of support. And I also think, you know, if we, if we look at individuals with SMA, we generally speaking have a wide range of postural needs when it comes to seating.

Josh 5:35

And so, like my seating needs at the moment would be totally different to your seating needs give or take. And if you've got someone with say, SMA type one or you know, a weak SMA type two, you then potentially got different body shapes and maybe less or more head control. And all of a sudden when you're taken out of your chair, as you'll appreciate, then sitting in a seat that isn't designed for you, is almost near on impossible for the majority of us to actually sit in, not only independently but comfortably as well. And so I think there is a big area or a big focus that goes untouched within the industry around supporting people with a range of postural needs, particularly those with sort of high and complex postural needs.

Martyn 6:22

Yeah, Yeah, totally agree. I mean, one more thought, before we dive into the business entrepreneurs side, which I think, you know, you're speaking to those challenges around posture and aircraft and assistance, which very much inspired your business idea and your product idea and your entrepreneur journey. Just on that broader travel point. I mean, just for the listeners, really like kind of what are your favourite places, we mentioned Tenerife a bit, but I guess the sort of juxtaposition of what some of your favourite destinations and what are some of your worst as well.

Josh 6:59

Okay, I'm going to, I'm going to hit people with Amsterdam. I mean, I don't remember much of Amsterdam, but I had a bloody good night out. And yeah, I mean, I really enjoyed Amsterdam and actually, it's quite an accessible place, much better than somewhere like Paris or something like that, where you've got a metro with three lines that are accessible, pretty much. I must admit, I really didn't enjoy Paris, from an accessibility point of view, I did not enjoy it at all.

Martyn 7:28

They got the Paralympic Games this summer as well, which will be interesting.

Josh 7:31

Yeah, they're going to struggle, they have no idea what they're in for. I mean, that, you know, the buses getting around pretty carnage in Paris as well. So, I mean, good luck to everyone going over there but I think people might be in for a bit of a shock when they realise how

inaccessible the metro actually is. And then another trip I went on, it was an amazing experience. I went to the Caribbean, sailing with the Jubilee Sailing trust, and it's a charity that enables people with disabilities to go on these kinds of tall sailing ships, and sadly, I think they're just closing down now, but there was this trip around Antigua and I had to give up my powered chair and I had to sit in a manual chair for seven days at the mercy of my dad pushing me around.

Martyn 8:13

Oh wow.

Josh 8:14

On the ship, there was a hoist that was attached to a fixed like hook in the ceiling, so it wasn't like a H-frame hoist. It was just the mechanism of a hoist attached to like this carabiner and in order to get me onto the bed, my dad had to push me across in the hoist, and I had to lower down at an angle into a bunk bed, my dad's sleeping above me. And this trip I was totally at the reliance of obviously my dad, I couldn't really do anything.

Josh 8:43

And it was the, it was probably the most scariest trip that I've ever been on, because it was not what we would say as accessible. It was well out of my comfort zone, but actually the trip itself in terms of what it showed me and what it taught me, both from having a relationship with my dad, but also the dependence on other people coming together to help make the trip as accessible and as fun and enjoyable as possible. It was quite a remarkable trip, I mean, I nearly fell out my wheelchair twice.

Josh 9:14

I got lifted over the side of the ship down into a little boat and on to Princess Diana beach in Barbuda and ate lobster. And like these are the types of things that you would never dream of doing, and I think when you, in order to go, and you'll appreciate this, in order to go and experience all of these different things, you really do have to kind of get out of that comfort zone of, you know, being used to what's familiar, because ultimately, when you go and do these things, it's not it's not meant to be familiar.

Josh 9:45

And if you want to be able to experience these things, you've got to compromise a little bit, and put your trust in others. And I think that's a big thing that we're generally, people with SMA, are very good at putting trust in other people. So yeah, that's just again, another trip that was a bad trip from an accessibility point of view, but what I got out of it was unbelievable.

Martyn 10:06

Yeah, and there's a bit of a, almost a metaphor in life in general isn't there, those times that are more challenging we often learn about ourselves when we grow, and they're actually more memorable. Whereas when everything's always easy, and plain sailing, yeah it's good, like, it's

preferable in some ways, but then yet, we maybe don't learn as much from it. And they're not as memorable. So yeah, I hear you on that one.

Josh 10:30

Sure.

Martyn 10:31

So yeah, I mentioned earlier about the passion I've had for travel being a lot about going to new places, meeting new people, different languages, different cultures. So there's definitely a lot of different places I've been that were phenomenally good fun for different reasons. I suppose a couple of standouts, one would be Australia, it was my first proper independent trip, without family, so with personal care assistance, and it was the other side of the world, so that made it quite a challenge.

Martyn 11:04

There was obviously a lot of logistics around, not just the flights, but all the other elements of hoist hire and adapted vehicles and all that sort of stuff. But yeah, it was cool to see Sydney and Melbourne, yeah, just to have that globetrotting otherside of the world experience was really cool. Obviously, being in Australia, the language was the same, and a lot of the culture was the same.

Martyn 11:30

Another trip would be Japan just because it was, you know, otherworldly and so amazing with the obviously the language, but the different customs and the rituals were really cool. And I've spent a lot of time in Spain, I don't know if I would quite say I've lived there, but I've spent months at a time there and really got to love the Spanish language and the Spanish culture. So Spain is very high up on my list for sure.

Josh 11:56

Mmm, yeah yeah

Martyn 11:58

So we've heard some travel stories and we've delved slightly into the airline, aircraft flying situation. So from that passion that you've got and from those challenges that we, people with SMA, but obviously broader as well, like other conditions that have the need to be transferred like the SMA community as well. How and when did that start to become a more business idea? What was the journey there?

Josh 12:29

The journey is pretty well documented. I mean, I was in Tenerife in 2017, I think it was, and I was reading a book called Start With Why by Simon Sinek and it got me thinking about all of the kind of the various stages that I was at in my life at the time. And I started asking myself why quite a lot, in terms of why was I doing my job? Why was I doing these other things at the time? And was it actually giving me any fulfilment or any sort of real world impact? And to be quite honest the answer was no.

Josh 13:02

And then it got me thinking about, you know, some of the challenges that I've had in my life from housing, to getting PA cover, getting transport, and then of course, air travel, being another one. And then I was reflecting on a lot of my trips that I had in air travel sort of from since I had spinal fusion at 14 and I soon started realising that, you know, air travel is really difficult. And on this one trip that year out in Tenerife, I remember seeing a gentleman that was about I would say six foot two to six foot four, he must have been, I don't know, maybe 15/16 stone and watching him get lifted into a window seat with four people was probably one of the most horrific things I've ever seen.

Josh 13:52

And the poor chap was just, you know, he sent me some photos afterwards, after that trip, and he was literally purple all down one side of his body. And I kind of came away from that holiday after that and reading the book, and then reflecting on my own experiences and thought well, something needs to change and when you start diving into the industry generally, it's quite a complex beast and we haven't got time to cover it today. But it led me down a very quick route of trying to create another type of device to help transfer people on and off an aircraft where they weren't reliant on the airports or airlines providing the equipment because we know today that even if they do have equipment, it's either staff don't know how to use it properly, or two you request to use a hoist and it's not there, and it causes all sorts of logistical problems

Josh 14:44

So I wanted to remove the reliance on industry to provide the equipment so that people when they travel, have the ability to take their own equipment with them, and whilst we know it's not perfect, in the ideal world of what we'd like to see, it's better than having nothing, generally speaking. And I think giving passengers the ability to choose what equipment they'd like to take and use based on their needs, and giving people the option, rather than being forced by industry to say no you have to use this. It's always making sure that you're putting the choice for the passenger first, and not letting the industry tell you what's best for you that they need to use. So yeah, that's kind of where it stemmed from really.

Martyn 15:25

Yeah, and knowing you as, as well and as long as I do now, I know that there's sort of two sides that's evolved from that, one being kind of empowering disabled people to fly more safely with the equipment and we'll come back a bit to the specific products you've designed and launched under Ablemove in a minute. But also that kind of not letting industry get away with it, so to speak, or at least educating them and trying to even if it's not directly with airlines and airports, which I know you have done, but also looking at the kind of legislation.

Martyn 16:00

And that side, so kind of looking back at what I know you've done you've sort of gone for both sides of the coin, where it's helped the disabled people flying more comfortably today, and work on those bigger systemic barriers to pull them down for the longer run, really. But I mean, in

terms of the product side could you speak a bit more about Ablemove, and how did you make products like you know, many people have cool ideas, it'd be interesting how you went from an idea to a physical product that now is, you know, retailing as well.

Josh 16:40

Yeah, so we just, basically, we have slings, leg straps and other kind of daily living aids in our business and the main ones that started out was the slings. And we reached out to a manufacturer that produces slings in the UK, and gave them the idea that I had at the time of a sling that we would like to use for the industry and there was a bit of conversation with them about kind of the design elements of it and trying not to overcomplicate things, and what conceptually, our original design was very, very good. But the reality of it wasn't so great in terms of its ease of use, and the confusion that it may have caused for airport staff. So we started cutting it back a little bit and we introduced another sling called our Able sling light, which is generally much more simpler, easier to use for people.

Josh 17:33

So we kind of worked with industry, we worked with sling manufacturers to make sure that the slings were made in accordance with the standards that they needed to be made to. We worked with industry to understand from a moving, handling point of view where they wanted like the handles located for lifting in and out of the cabin and stuff like that, so quite a lot went into kind of those early stages. And then we had a couple of people from a usability perspective, use the slings, we probably could have done quite a bit more usability testing, to be fair, more could be done. And I think every organisation with products will always say you can do more, you know, you're always iterating and I think that's probably a conversation under entrepreneurship.

Josh 18:14

But you know, this idea that you start out with one product, and then you evolve it and you get feedback, and then you evolve it again, it's a bit like the iPhone, isn't it? You know, there's one coming out every year, but they're already probably on iPhone 17, 18 already, and the iPhone 15 has just been released. So it's yeah, I think for me, I'm all about the practical side of things, just get the job done, get something out there so that people can use today. I think we get a lot of people that talk a lot and say a lot, but don't actually do a lot and I think it's nice to have products that help a certain set of people. It may not be helpful for others, but the point is, is that it is adding value to people out there and giving people a much better way of traveling generally, and I think for me that's quite empowering.

Josh 19:00

So we're just working on another product actually, in Canada to actually build out a brand new device that can be used on aircraft to support people with complex postural needs, so that you won't need to be lifted in and out of an aisle chair. Imagine being lifted from your chair into this device, and this device will take you into the aircraft, and you will be transferred in this device, and you'd be slid straight over the aircraft seat and secured into the seat. So there's no physical

lifting inside the aircraft and you can use this device to get to and from the toilet as well. And it has a foot rest, headrest, it has a harness, it has a pelvic support, so for people with like cerebral palsy, that have a tendency to push themselves out of their chairs, it will have all of the right support equipment on it to keep somebody independently and safely secured for a flight.

Josh 19:55

And we know today that accessing a toilet is probably the biggest barrier to people accessing air travel, more so than being able to fly in their chair, because the two go hand in hand, and it's actually quite surprising how many people won't travel mid to long haul, in their wheelchair even if they can't access the toilet. So we know it's a problem and we'd like to think that this device will give a lot of people the ability to access a toilet on an aircraft as well.

Josh 20:22

So that's been progressing. So there's a lot going on. And like I said, it's all about this being practical and yet just trying to work. It's a shame because the industry has lots of kind of design, not flaws, but design constraints, so you're having to work within the parameters. If you want to bring products to market quickly without trying to, you know, knock down different hurdles that others might be knocking down. I just want to get started today because in two years time people might not be around to travel. So I'm all about today, tomorrow as quickly as possible. For me, that's where I get the real buzz.

Martyn 21:00

It's phenomenal what you've achieved the last few years with this, you know, the transit, see which I've got one, and I've I've used it on my flights, and it has made it you know, much more practical, much more easy. There's still anxiety, as we know, about being lifted by people at the airport, who we've never met until that moment and they're lifting us.

Josh 21:22

I mean it's probably worth you just saying to people, like some of the problems that you even had because, you know, people need to understand that you can create a product that actually works pretty well. But in reality, when you're relying on industry, if you're getting them to do the lifting, there's still this element of trust, that they're going to know what they need to in order to lift. So I don't know, if you just want to share, you know, more broadly, maybe some of those, maybe not so good experiences that you've had, because I think it's important that people hear that as well.

Martyn 21:48

I think with or without the transit seat, it's just as you said earlier about, we have to put trust in people, but despite having put trust in those moments, I've had a couple of times where I badly injured my ankle, because they sort of semi dropped me and tried to secure by putting their knee under my foot and like sprained my foot up. And just last November, I was literally hanging over sideways of the aisle chair, looking at my wheelchair and thinking I was about a thud on the floor. So it hasn't prevented the worst fears, or not the worst fears, but it hasn't prevented

those types of situations. But it certainly made them happen far, far less than it would have done without the seat.

Josh 22:37

Yeah and I think there's that broader question of industry having to answer is it actually an equitable and fair experience that people like ourselves have to face in order to access air travel compared to those without disabilities? And the answer is no. And so therefore, you have to ask the industry that they have to be doing more to prevent this from happening, and that it's not acceptable to stay at this level that we're at now and that more does need to be done. Because we are not, there's just no justification in the world that anyone could tell me that we have a safe and equitable air travel experience compared to those without disabilities, because we don't.

Martyn 23:19

To that point, do you want to just mention a little bit about Rights on Flights and the more campaign side that you've been up to?

Josh 23:26

Yeah, we can do. I mean, the essence of Rights on Flights really is to encourage government to review the legal framework that we have in place that provides the protection of passengers with disabilities when it comes to air travel. It's largely fragmented, it has been ever since its inception, when it was introduced into the European Union. And what we want to do is strengthen those protections for passengers with air travel and align it to people's expectations of what we expect that of the industry today when it comes to air travel.

Josh 24:00

And there's a whole heap of stuff in there, it's not just pertaining to people with physical disabilities either. But when, when considering individuals with SMA, the things that we've got in there that we would like to see government start putting pressure or introducing into legislation is things like not having to pay for like a PA ticket. The industry, for example, requires people that can't evacuate independently to travel with a safety assistant and that's a requirement imposed by the industry based on safety grounds. Therefore, they are choosing to put that in place, but they then expect you to then pay the ticket fare to take the PA with you, so I think what we're trying to do is get the industry to waive that cost.

Josh 24:43

So like today, if you were to perhaps go to a theatre or a conference, you don't have to pay for a companion to go with you, because they are an extension of you to enable you to do the things that you need to do. So it's a bit of a penalty that we face when it comes to accessing air travel. So that's one of the things we're trying to look at improving.

Martyn 25:06

Thank you for listening to Part 1 of my Podcast episode. If you would like to hear more about mine and Josh's travel adventures, our discussion on the challenges of tourism, and our general hopes for the future of that, then check back in when Part 2 goes live.

Thanks everyone for listening.