

Inside Stories: An Elevated Perspective Transcript

Scott Simmie: Good day, ladies and gentlemen. This is your host speaking, and we're about to get underway. We'll be going on a journey together today, that reveals an incredible inside story. So, please ensure that your seatbelt is securely fastened, that your chairback is in an exceedingly comfortable position, and that you're ready for a very special voyage with a very special person. Joining me on today's Inside Stories is Kelly Lepley. Kelly lives in Anchorage and has a super cool job. Kelly, thanks for joining me today.

Kelley Lepley: You're welcome. It's nice to meet you, Scott.

Scott Simmie: Nice to meet you as well. Listen, tell us what you do for a living.

Kelley Lepley: I fly planes for a living, for a company called UPS, as a captain on a Boeing 747.

Scott Simmie: Wow. How long have you been doing this, and how did you get started?

Kelley Lepley: That's a great question. I have been with UPS since 2001, and just coming up on my 19th year anniversary, I guess it is. And started flying when I was 17 years of age. Flying small airplanes. I go to high school in the morning, and I would go to college in the afternoon, and I learned to fly on the weekends, and just slowly work my way up the ladder, flying small airplanes all the way up to the Boeing 747.

Scott Simmie: And so, you started taking lessons when you were 17. Was that something that had appealed to you even before then?

Kelley Lepley: Absolutely. Ever since I was a young girl, I wanted to fly. I wanted to soar. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to travel the world. I wanted to have the ability to see everything. And so, flying was an ability for me to go and do that.

Scott Simmie: I know that pilots often talk about the number of hours they've flown, as opposed to the number of different countries? How many hours do you have under your belt now?

Kelley Lepley: I gave up counting after 15,000.

Scott Simmie: Tell me, Kelly, where do you typically fly?

Kelley Lepley: We fly all over the world. On the Boeing 747, we fly what's called trunk routes, and we go from hub to hub, basically. And so, we bring all the freight in from Asia to the United States, or from Asia to the Middle East, or Asia to Europe and vice versa. And then from there, it's distributed from the hub centers to the smaller cities in smaller airplanes.

Scott Simmie: And is the cargo similar, or I guess just like anything else, it could be different cargo every time. Is that correct?

Kelley Lepley: It could be different cargo anytime.

Scott Simmie: And what's it been like since the pandemic? Have things changed for you at all in this job?

Kelley Lepley: It's been a little more challenging in the last couple of months. In fact, it started probably in February, for us going into Asia. We started carrying medical supplies over there when a lot of the other airlines were beginning to shut down for a while.

Scott Simmie: What sort of medical supplies? Are we talking personal protective gear? What sort of things would you be bringing in, and how much can you carry at a time in a 747?

Kelley Lepley: Well, we can carry up to roughly 300,000 pounds in the 747. And a lot of my understanding is, PPEs, we were carrying in Asia at that point in time, but we've carried PPEs and

ventilators, and everything of that sort. As pilots, unfortunately, we don't get a cargo manifest of what that 300,000 pounds is below us. It's only a small percentage we really get to see.

Scott Simmie: We think about doctors and nurses and people working in these essential services, as being the everyday heroes these days. But when you think of someone flying an aircraft halfway around the world, carrying supplies that could save someone's life, I guess I would certainly, personally elevate you to that category. What is it like as you're carrying this cargo, knowing how critical it is? Is there a different sensation, anything different going on in your mind when you know just how valuable this cargo is?

Kelley Lepley: I can only speak personally, but for me, yes. It's a humbling experience knowing that down below in my cargo hold, I'm carrying something that could be lifesaving for somebody back home here in the United States, or even in Europe or the Middle East. It is a humbling experience.

Scott Simmie: Has the protocol at airports for you changed, or protocols in the cockpit, have those sorts of things changed due to COVID-19?

Kelley Lepley: Well, I can tell you, my hands are much more raw because I end up cleaning them a lot more, with bacterial wipes and stuff of that sort. But yes, we're much more thorough on our cleaning process inside the cockpit and even outside in our crew cabin area, they will go through and sanitize everything of that sort. So, we've definitely increased the protocol there. And of course, we're in our PPEs when we're in airport situations and stuff like that, around people or populations, masses, we will wear that. And so, it has changed to that point there. Yes.

Scott Simmie: Now, my expertise when it comes to large aircraft is solely that of a passenger and flying from point A to point B. I'm curious, when you're carrying out some of these long haul flights, how many people are typically on board?

Kelley Lepley: Well that depends because it's all based on how many hours of flight in a segment. And so, if it's below eight hours, there's just two of us. If it's over eight hours, between eight hours and twelve, then we'll have a third crew member who becomes our relief officer, so one of us can go and take a break. And then if it's over 12 hours, like on our Louisville to Dubai flight, or a Hong Kong to Cologne flight, we will have a fourth crew member. And so, that's called a dual crew situation. So, one crew will fly for the first half and the other crew will fly for the other half.

Scott Simmie: And if you're going to a destination, say in Asia, are you typically at the other end for a single night before flying back, or does that vary as well?

Kelley Lepley: It varies. We can have as short as 18 hours, all the way up to 70 to 96. It just depends on how the schedule is built for that specific pairing.

Scott Simmie: Is there a preference for you personally. I'm thinking about jet lag and what you need in terms of time to recuperate and feel refreshed for the flight back?

Kelley Lepley: Of course. Always seemed like I rest, I eat, I rest, I exercise, and that's pretty much how I go about it. But yes, it's always a challenge when you're traveling overseas, is to figure out how to make your rest work in order to go back to work and be well rested to fly.

Scott Simmie: A friend of mine is a pilot or a commercial pilot for Air Transat in Canada. They're not flying at the moment, although they do have plans to resume, I believe, in July, but of course, we've seen major layoffs within the airline industry. What are you hearing from other pilots whose careers have been put on hold by COVID-19?

Kelley Lepley: I think we're all a little anxious at the moment. We really don't know what to expect. There's no playbook on this one. So, it's really hard to understand how it's going to pan out in the

longterm. But yeah, I think many of my peers are very anxious about what does the future hold for the aviation world?

Scott Simmie: Do you anticipate we'll get back to normal, the way things were before once the pandemic is over, or do you think there are going to be some changes in protocol as we go forward?

Kelley Lepley: I think it's really difficult to know. I think when you look at it, the best thing you have to first define is what is normal. I think everything in our lives has changed in the last couple of months, just like it did in the aviation world in 9/11. And there's really no playbook, again, what to expect going forward from here.

Scott Simmie: I'm willing to bet that you've had young women or students in schools, come up to you and say, "I'm really interested in this. How would I go about it?" What do you tell them?

Kelley Lepley: Well, the first thing that I tell them is to look at the programs. There's all kinds of different programs when it comes to colleges. My family didn't have a lot of money, so I went to a community college, and didn't have the name recognition at all, but they offered a great education, got my two-year degree. And from that point forward, got a job. And during that period, for the next 10 years, I worked on my four-year program. And from then, got hired at companies, then worked up the ladder.

Kelley Lepley: It just depends on the determination. If there's a will, there's a way. Some people can afford a name-brand college where you can spend a lot of money and walk out with a lot of debt. I didn't have that ability. And so, I find that if there is a will, there's a way, and to be persistent, and also develop relationships early on. Relationships are everything in this world, no matter what career you choose. And if you find a mentor who was there, who will guide you and direct you, you're going to have that person who's going to help you find the right connections to get hired at the places you want to go to.

Scott Simmie: When I looked at your profile, and we first became connected via Twitter because I was following you, I noticed that you also do give speeches, that you're a public speaker from time to time. I'm curious, who are the people who want you to come and speak, and what are the topics they want you to speak about?

Kelley Lepley: I've spoken at women's groups. I've spoken in front of audience at TED. I've spoken to women's aviation groups, just as an encouragement. I've been to colleges, universities, to speak about that as well.

Scott Simmie: Sometimes, when a person gives a speech, and I only know this because there was a period after writing a book when I was on a speaking tour, but people will come up to you and they'll tell you a personal story or they'll ask you a question, or they'll tell you that they enjoyed your speech, or maybe they'll tell you they didn't enjoy your speech. I'm wondering, and you may have to dive deep here, but if there's one young person who came up to you and said something that has particularly stuck with you after one of your speeches, and made you feel good.

Kelley Lepley: I've had many come up afterwards. And one of the speeches that I've done is on living an authentic life. I think too many times, as human beings, we hide behind a shell and we act a part we don't play. And I've been able to share my story from a personal level. And people came up to me from all walks of life, that thanked me for that, that I would be so open and authentic, and to share my story when it comes to the trials and tribulations of my life, that have brought me to this point.

Scott Simmie: And this is slightly on and slightly off-topic, but any tips for those of us who suffered tremendous jet lag when flying, because, you obviously are hitting other time zones and turning right around.

Kelley Lepley: I sleep in four-hour increments. And so, when on my layovers, when I'm tired, I sleep. When I'm not tired, I wake up. And so, there's a lot of times, it's two o'clock in the morning in Hong

Kong, I'm wide awake. And then when it's two o'clock in the afternoon, I am dead to the world. So, I have learned through my aviation travels throughout the years, the best thing is listen to your body clock. When it says, it's tired, go take a four-hour nap. And that allows me to be refreshed and go on and do whatever. And I never get acclimated to a time zone because I'm constantly changing. And so, that's been the best way for me to acclimate myself, is by taking short four-hour naps if I need to.

Scott Simmie: You're also balancing this amazing career where you're jet-setting around the world with a family life. What can you tell me about your home life? Can you give us a snapshot of that?

Kelley Lepley: That's been an interesting life. I have been commuting from Anchorage to Louisville for roughly 10 years. And as my girls were growing up, it afforded me a better home life with them because I was much more senior in Anchorage, and so I was able to get the time off when I needed to, like the holidays when the girls were off, or have the summers off to be off with them. And so, it's been a great opportunity for me to raise two beautiful young ladies. One is at college, she is about to graduate from Arizona State here this December. And my other daughter will be graduating from high school next year in Kentucky. And she is hoping to come to Alaska to go to a vet school.

Scott Simmie: What do your daughters think of your career?

Kelley Lepley: As long as I put food on the table and I take care of them and love them, that's all they care about. No, really. I mean, they're very happy that I have a career like this, but really I'm just mom to them.

Scott Simmie: Now, you live in Anchorage. How long have you been there? And what's it like living in Alaska, for those of us who have only seen pictures?

Kelley Lepley: Alaska is probably one of the most beautiful states in the country. I absolutely love it. I love the outdoors. In fact, my daughters and I just finished a vacation touring around Alaska this last week. Last week, we were sea kayaking out on Columbia Glacier, and to go in and out of the Bay Area and see the Glacier and see the ice formations, and then have these little sea lions pop up or harbor lions pop up their heads and look at you and go back under, and then to go see the orca whales and stuff like that. You can't describe it. It's something you have to see. After that, we went and did ice climbing. We climbed the glacier, often, Kennecott, Alaska. Everything is so massive. It's so big. It's so beautiful. It's just an incredible place to visit.

Scott Simmie: I was following your travels on Twitter and I saw one post where you were lowered into some sort of fissure in Glacier. What was happening there? And tell us what you saw.

Kelley Lepley: It's called a moulin, and my understanding and my very limited understanding of a moulin, is when there's a soft spot in a glacier, and the water as it melts, it slowly digs a hole through the soft spot in the glacier. And over time, it creates a long waterfall, if you will. So, it's probably 50, 100, 200 feet deep. It's a hole that's inside the glacier. And as you are lowered into it, you see the waterfall, and the ice, it's the most beautiful blue color you could imagine. It's the most terrifying thing I've probably ever done in my life because I'm literally trusting the person who's got me on a rope, lowering me into this cave before I had to climb back out of it. But it was probably the most exhilarated experience I've ever done.

Scott Simmie: How low were you lowered?

Kelley Lepley: We were only lowered 15 feet, about where the blue ice starts, because, once you get down below the blue ice, it's hard to chisel into. And being a beginner ice climber, that's the last thing I want to do, is go try to climb out of something for more experienced people, but it was enough where I could get down there and see how beautiful it was.

Scott Simmie: What is the best part about being a pilot?

Kelley Lepley: That is a really good question. For being a pilot, I love the ability to be in control of something so massive, and to be able to fly this close to a million-pound airplane, from point A to point B, halfway around the world, and do it in 10, 12 hours. It's afforded me the opportunity to see the world and to learn about culture and see people. There's so much about flying that I love, but I guess the ability now, being captain, is now having an ability, I guess, to teach the mentor, the next cadre of pilots that are coming through as first officers, they'll ultimately be captains as well. That's probably one of the things I really enjoy doing.

Scott Simmie: And what about the 747 itself? What's that like to fly?

Kelley Lepley: It's an incredible machine; is the best way I can explain it. Boeing created a beautiful product. It is very responsive to the control inputs. They say it flies like a small Cessna. In reality, it does. You put a little input into it, the airplane reacts immediately to whatever you want to do to it. It's just a great airplane. There's a lot of room to move around, I get my own bedroom, things like that. So, there's a lot more accommodations when it comes to cruise on long haul flights. It's an absolutely beautiful airplane and one incredible machine that Boeing has put together.

Scott Simmie: I have the advantage of being able to see you right now because we're doing this as a video Zoom call. I can hear the passion in your voice when you're talking about that aircraft, but I can also see it in your face that you absolutely love flying. And does it ever get old for you? You've been doing it now, since, as you said, you were 17.

Kelley Lepley: No, it never gets old because every day's a new day. I will leave a blizzard here in Alaska, and I will head down south down to Hong Kong, and I'll be dodging thunderstorms. So, you're always constantly thinking, "What are the challenges before you? How am I going to counteract those challenges? How am I going to get around them? What am I going to do? How I'm going to react?" So, your mind is constantly working throughout the process, throughout the flight, and how to best navigate the situations that wait for you, that you have no playbook before? You're just basically going out, and whatever you're handed to you, you react to.

Scott Simmie: There was something you said earlier on when you were talking about speeches you've made. You mentioned, I believe, that you sometimes cover the accomplishments you've made in your life, but also some of the challenges that you've overcome. And I'm curious if there's one particular challenge that you often tell people about, or if there's something you'd be comfortable sharing, that was a challenge or impediment that you faced in your life, that you were able to push through and overcome.

Kelley Lepley: That is a really tough question. And I don't know if you want to get into that one here. All right. I'm going to share you my personal story. I was assigned male at birth, and I grew up in a Christian home and I was taught that gender identity, gender dysphoria, homophobic, or being homosexual, anything like that, being gay, lesbian, transgender, was of sin. And so, I learned to hide it, I learned to suppress it. And throughout my life, I focused on flying. That's what made me successful in my career, is I focused on something that I loved. And flying has been something I've always wanted to do. And so, from a very young age, I began to work towards my goal of becoming a pilot, hiding the true fact of who I was and as a person.

Kelley Lepley: And I achieved that goal, but I was still miserable. And as time went on, it became much more difficult for me to function as a person. And so I began seeking help for this thing called gender dysphoria. And it was a long journey, spent 10 years researching it, and it stemmed after the loss of my biological daughter, and it would have been in the year 2000. My biological daughter was born with a congenital brain malformation, and she ended up passing away. And I remember being taught early on in my childhood life that God doesn't make mistakes. And I wanted to know, "Okay, if God doesn't make mistakes, then why was my daughter born without a brain?"

Kelley Lepley: And I began spending 10 years of research understanding what is gender dysphoria? Is this something I created, or is this something that was created in the womb? And as time progressed, I knew I needed help. And so I sought some help when it came to psychologists and psychiatrists who understand this matter when it came to gender dysphoria, and I found out the older I get, the more difficult it would become. And I remember this question my doctor asked me the one day, he says, "You have one life. You're looking back on your life right now. You have everything. You've got a beautiful home, lovely family, you've got a nice yard, you've got a business on the side, you're flying for a major airline. What do you see?" And I said, "I see nothing but misery."

Kelley Lepley: He says, "I want you to look forward in your life. What do you see?" I said, "I can't see myself living." And it wasn't that it was suicidal by any means. No. It was like I spent every waking moment of my life focused on something that I needed to be in order to fit in societal norms, and it took a toll on my life. And he said this one phrase, and I'll never forget. He says, "You have one life. What are you doing with it?" And I thought about that. And it's like, "What am I doing with this life? I have everything that the world thinks would be successful in my life, but I don't have myself. I don't have me as a person." And so, I really had to do some really self-analysis of who I was as a person, really digging deep inside and finding out who I really was. And I prayed about it a lot. And I said, "God, if this is your will, then open up the door."

Kelley Lepley: And from that point forward, he did. And I think that's one of the things why I love my company, UPS. They stood by me. They stood by me throughout this whole process and gave me the opportunity to be the person that I am today, to become successful as a pilot at a company like UPS. I'll never forget that. And I guess that's been the challenge of my life is that, you know what? We all have challenges no matter what it is in our lives. When it comes to our marriage, it comes to our work, whatever. We all have challenges, but we all have one life. And my question is to everybody that listened to this is; what are we doing with our lives? Are we living it to our fullest, or are we live it for others? And I had to come to that conclusion that I can't continue to live my life for others, because, in doing so, I've lost myself.

Scott Simmie: You can see my face. I want to thank you for sharing. That was such an incredibly honest story that you shared, and that I think will send such a positive message to so many people who hear this. So, first of all, I want to thank you so much for sharing that. And secondly, we're watching incredible changes take place in the United States and other countries right now, and I'm referring, of course, to the kind of civil rights movement, but wrapped up in that, has been, we are all equal here on this planet. And I'm curious, as you have watched these demonstrations unfold, if you have felt something there about this search, this quest for our authentic selves and for equality.

Kelley Lepley: My heart hurts for people who are being suppressed. And I think in the world that we live in, I look at this world as a mosaic. It takes all of us to create a beautiful mosaic. I may not fit in the normal situation that most people may fit in. You may have your own story, but all of us have our own stories. And what makes our stories complete is when we can fit into society and to give back. And I remember the story about Alan Turing. He was the gentleman who developed the Enigma; a machine to decipher the code that the Germans were... Actually designed the machine to read the enigma. And the cost for that was incredible. He overcame huge obstacles and was able to successfully decode what the Germans were doing through his machine.

Kelley Lepley: And in doing so, he saved the world from World War II continuing, saved millions of lives, and a cost of many millions of dollars. But society saw unfit to look at that, and they focused on his sexuality. And a long story short, they took away a part of Alan Turing in the end. Alan Turing ended up taking his own life. But what I share about that is that when you take away a part of a person, you take away the whole person. And when you do that, we in society all lose something. And so, when you take

away a certain segment of society from certain places, that mosaic isn't complete anymore. And I think that's the story that I like to share with people.

Scott Simmie: Thank you so much, Kelly. Now, you've never heard this sound before. At least not coming from me, but this sound of a knife against a drinking glass means that we're going to wrap things up in a minute, and we're hitting our little rapid-fire round, where I'm just going to ask you a few fast questions. And I just want the first answer that pops out of your mind. Here we go. What is your favorite aircraft?

Kelley Lepley: The 747.

Scott Simmie: What is your favorite movie that involves flight?

Kelley Lepley: Airplane.

Scott Simmie: Does driving seem boring after flying?

Kelley Lepley: I have a hard time driving the speed limit.

Scott Simmie: You're from Alaska. What type of insect repellent do you use?

Kelley Lepley: That's a great question. I've yet to find one that's successful.

Scott Simmie: Kelly Lepley. Listen, thank you so much for sharing your story and for being so deeply honest and true to yourself.

Kelley Lepley: Thank you.

Scott Simmie: I thought of watching some of Kelly's speeches before this interview, and the truth is, it was a really busy week and I just didn't get around to it. So, I didn't know that story until she shared it, but what a message, and how true it is. You only live once, so, live your authentic life. If you liked Kelly, her Twitter handle is kclepley, and that is spelled kilo, Charlie, Lima, echo, poppa, Lima, echo, Yankee. Kelly's inside stories certainly touched me. And I truly hope it touched you. I'm Scott Simmie. And it's been a pleasure flying with you today.

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