



Disability History and Awareness Month 2023

Engracia Figueroa

Mobility devices are one of the most common associations people have with disability; if you think of disability, there's a fair chance you're picturing a person in a wheelchair. It's not a trick; it's the symbol associated with the ADA and disabled people, by extension. For some people with disabilities, mobility devices are essential to their ability to safely and fully participate in everyday life. Figueroa's



disability required that she utilize a specialized wheelchair to properly support her spine and prevent the onset of muscle spasms, pressure ulcers, and other complications of her disability.

However, Figueroa passed in October 2021 due to complications from United Airlines damaging her custom mobility device. When United damaged her wheelchair in transit and failed to care for her in the interim adequately, they – as Figueroa put it – re-disabled her. Before her death, she said, "Mobility devices are an extension of our bodies. When they are damaged or destroyed, we become re-disabled." This is indicative of a broader trend, whereas federal reports show that more than 6,500 wheelchairs and scooters on planes in 2020, or approximately 1.3%, were significantly damaged.

No one piece of mobility equipment is alike; like disability, mobility equipment is unique to its owner. Figueroa used her platform to advocate for these accommodations and the broader recognition of disabled people and healthcare reforms. Her experience with United Airlines highlights a much broader issue with travel accessibility; no one with a disability is immune, and the most vulnerable among them are the most likely to be more severely impacted. For Figueroa, it meant her untimely passing. For veterans, who have since rallied behind her cause, it means a continued lack of care for those who have given all of themselves for something bigger than themselves. For all disabled travelers, it means a lack of safety and support. Travel of all kinds remains inaccessible for disabled people. For some, it is inconvenient and dehumanizing. For Figueroa, it was fatal. She spent her final weeks fervently advocating for greater accessibility for disabled transit passengers and greater accountability for transit companies.

Profiles by Andrew Caruana, Policy and Research Intern, Office of Senator Sara Gelser Blouin

Andrew is a Junior at Willamette University studying philosophy. He is a lifelong Oregonian and has cerebral palsy.

Sen.SaraGelser@OregonLegislature.Gov

503-986-1708