

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Laurent: Inclusiveness is the overall drive, the overall notion of what we do. It's not just people with disabilities, it's families. It's groups traveling together. It's friends. We're looking at inclusiveness. Hopefully, projecting into the future where issues of disabilities, accessibilities will be so much part of the mainstream that you don't need to harp about it over and over and over again. Why is this, this idea is inclusiveness? Where everybody is welcome.

Erik: It's easy to talk about the successes, but what doesn't get talked about enough is the struggle. My name is Erik [inaudible 00:00:50] I've gotten the chance to ascend Mount Everest, to climb the tallest mountain in every continent, to kayak the Grand Canyon, and I happen to be blind. It's been a struggle to live what I call a no barriers life. To define it, to push the parameters of what it means, and part of the equation is diving into the learning process, and trying to illuminate the universal elements that exist along the way. That unexplored terrain between those dark places we find ourselves in in the Summit, exists a map. That map, that way forward is what we call No Barriers.

Dave: Born in Casablanca to a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural family with roots in Europe, Africa and South America, Laurent had the privilege of growing up living and traveling around the world. In 2012, after years of business in the tech and real estate arena, he decided to take on a new adventure. With his wife, Aïcha Nyström they started their own accessible travel company called Tapooz Travel. They focus on encouraging, supporting and assisting travel experiences for the community of people with disabilities, and organizing accessible trips for hundreds of clients from individuals and families to small group travel.

Dave: Today Tapooz Travel operates in over 27 destinations worldwide. Laurent and Aïcha share the passion and advocacy for accessibility and inclusiveness by contributing articles, collaborating and developing travel guides and other accessible resources, delivering workshops and presentations, and advising foreign entities on the development of accessible tourism.

Dave: Laurent is passionate about the outdoors. His greatest joy comes from hiking in the desert and kayaking in almost any body of water. Luckily, his spouse and kids share that joy as well.

Dave: Welcome to the No Barriers podcast. Really excited to have Laurent with us today to talk about accessible travel, among other things. Laurent, welcome to the show.

Laurent: Thank you, David. Thank you. I'm happy to be here. Hello, Erik. Hello, Jeff.

Dave: I've been so excited about this interview because I'm really fascinated by all of your work and history and all you've brought to the table to make travel accessible for people with disabilities. You own a company, Tapooz Travel. First of all, that's a cool name. Unique. Tell us how that name comes to be.

Laurent: Well it was not a first choice. When Icha and I, my wife and I, we decided to start a company, we went through the possible variations of accessible trek, mobility travel, all the names that had some ability or accessibility built into the name. I actually went into the internet registry and grabbed as many names as I could that had this connotation. Eventually we had a poll, in our internet poll among our friends, especially in the community of people with disabilities, and the reaction to some names were very strong.

Laurent: We picked up a couple, and we created a website. Just go for it, and eventually we had somebody very well known in the community, true accessibility advocate, his name was Dr. Scott Rains, he passed away, but he came back to us

and he said, "Guys, you're out of line. We know that we have disabilities. We know that we have issues with accessibility. When I go into a website to look for exciting travel destinations, I'm looking at the National Geographic. I'm looking at World News Travel. I'm looking at all those websites that have just great experiences. I'm not looking for the one that tells me again and again that I have a disability. So just forget about that. Just think of a name that is exciting to you and then you can build a brand around it, and go for it." It was kind of an epiphany so we quickly abandoned all those names that we had, and just working back home through the Monterey market, which is a great produce market just down the street from where we are in Berkeley.

Laurent: They just got us shipments of beautiful oranges, and Icha and I looked at each other and said, at the same time in Hebrew, "Tapooz". We both speak Hebrew, that's another story. We look at these fruits and they were just gorgeous, and we said, "Tapooz," and that's it, became the name of the company and we're very happy with that.

Dave: I like it because it's like one of those words that, at least for Americans, is like kind of exciting and just makes you think about something exotic or mysterious.

Laurent: I agree with you. The double 'O' and the 'Z' lends itself to all kinds of marketing gimmicks. We're very happy with that.

Jeff: There's also something that happened though because instead of allowing the impotence behind your company, which is accessibility, to be front and center in the name, you chose to allow it to be just a nebulous name that for you symbolized beauty in whatever connotation you had. Here you are saying we're this organization, we create accessible travel for disabled participants, but we're not going to market or brand in that direction because is that an intentional thing? I know you said you got feedback from other people, but where was your mindset on that, and not drawing attention to what you were doing?

Laurent: The moment really came when Scott Reins came back to us with that. I remember his tone of voice, he was almost insulted that we picked up a name that was Accessible Trek or whatever the name was because, and that was an epiphany, in many respects. It also helped us to frame in our own mind what we wanted to build, and we definitely wanted to build an entity, a company that is offering those accessible experiences. Very quickly, the motto that we decided to adopt and adapt to what we were doing is "tours and adventures for people of all abilities." So inclusiveness is the overall drive, the overall notion of what we do. It's not just people with disabilities. It's families. It's groups traveling together. It's friends. We're looking at inclusiveness as the main idea behind the company.

Laurent: When you go to our website, obviously everything that we do is about accessibility, but it doesn't have to be anymore. That's kind of hopefully projecting into the future, where issues of disabilities, accessibility will be so much part of the mainstream that you don't need to harp about it over and over and over again.

Laurent: What replaces this idea is inclusiveness. Where everybody is welcome. Where regardless of your mobility and abilities.

Dave: Laurent, for our listeners who accessible travel inclusive experiences are newer to them, talk a little bit about what that means?

Laurent: I'm going to backpedal for a second. Icha and I, my wife and I have always been travelers, have always enjoyed the outdoors, always involved in numerous activities. We know, and certainly by our volunteering with ETC, that Erik mentioned earlier, we know for a fact that is almost nothing that you cannot do with any type of disability if you have the right support, the assistant, the equipment, the spirit and so

forth. That's what we wanted to bring to what we do, knowing that you can do almost everything that you set your mind into. Again, that's if you have the right support, people, equipment and so forth.

Laurent: When we created this company that was the main driver. We wanted to show people that may not be comfortable traveling, may not be comfortable going in the outdoors or hiking or deciding to travel in the US, overseas or visiting the numerous, beautiful places that we have. Wanting to make sure that we can explain to them, show to them and support them in pursuing those adventures.

Laurent: I've got to tell you, over the past years, since we started our company, the attitude has changed. We definitely see an evolution for the better. More and more people are ready to get out of their comfort zone and travel and do it with a spouse, do it with a family member, do it with friends. It's [inaudible 00:09:55] of what we thought we would be doing from the beginning. I always say, and this is not forced humility, I always say that I wish there were a lot, a lot more people doing what we do because we're a commercial company, and we're involved in many non-profit and many advocacy activities, but Tapooz Travel is a commercial entity and we're very successful, and I wish there were a lot more travel companies doing what we do because the demand for what we do is huge. It's humongous and it's growing year after year after year.

Erik: Back us up with your background, because you have a really eclectic background and I imagine there's a not a major you take in university in accessible travel. You've lived all over the world. You were in the military. You were a technologist bringing innovations to the table. You were an architect. An urban planner. What prepares you for this expertise?

Laurent: We were so naïve. When my wife and I decided to jump into this we had no idea what we were doing. Again, I'm not kidding you. We had this expertise or this experience as volunteer outdoors guides, and I'm a sea kayak person. Icha, she's a ski person. She's even crazier than I am, [inaudible 00:11:20] skiing in the slopes of the Sahara, but apart from that and apart our years of having friends in real shares and our infinity to the committee of people with disabilities here in the Bay Area of California, we were clueless. I'm tell you, Erik, David and Jeff, we were so naïve. We had no idea what we were doing. We just knew that there was a market for that just by talking to our friends, just by going on expeditions, on many trip with friends in wheelchairs. We knew that there was a demand for that.

Laurent: But when we created Tapooz, the original idea is nothing like what Tapooz is like today. Originally, and I'm not kidding you, the idea was to kind of ease into some early, quiet retirement, where we would just take friends and other people that will accept to do that with us, half a day expeditions. That was the original website, the original idea was let's go to the wine country. Let's go kayaking on the Bay. Let me take you on a tour of iconic street and places of San Francisco. That was the original idea. Activities, no more than two or three hours, maybe half a day, and all around the Bay Area. That was the original concept. This is how we started Tapooz back in the days. Back in 2012.

Laurent: The moment we opened the door, the moment we said, "That's it. We are a company doing accessible travels and adventures." Our first clients were a group from Argentina that came over and said, "That's great to go and drink the wine in the wine country. We have wine in Argentina. That's great, but can you take us for a whole week tour of coastal California? Can we go from San Francisco to Los Angeles on a road trip with you guys?" You know, when you create a new company, and I'm sure you guys went through that, you don't say no. You never say no. You

say yes, and then you scratch your head and you figure out how you do it. That's literally the way it started. We started with the idea just referring these small excursions around the Bay Area, but very quickly we understood that the demand was huge.

Laurent: Our second group was a group from Scandinavia. Then we had a group from the US, through the [inaudible 00:13:39] They all wanted to go to New York for a week. It grew organically, and us understanding that there is a demand. We learn on the fly, but I'm very proud to say that six, seven years after the fact, we are truly the experts because I make it sound easy, but believe me, it is extremely complex to put a week long or two week long trip for a group from Australia or France or Israel or from the US. The complexity of putting those trips together is very, very large, but it's great.

Jeff: I need to find out something here. As Erik mentioned, you've got a pretty wide spectrum of experience, but you admitted you didn't know what you were doing when you started this. This was a bit of a I think I want to do this, then we've got to figure out how to do this. What was the catalyst behind you and your wife, deciding to have this niche of disabled, accessible travel as opposed to just another travel company? You don't have a physical ability. Am I right? And if you do, can you explain? Then tell us where is the connection there.

Laurent: I don't have a physical disability. I have a bit of dyslexia, but I don't think that even counts. It's just, I think the work with the ETC is probably the main driver.

Dave: And that's Environmental Travel Companion. An organization out of San Francisco that does a lot of sea kayaking, right?

Laurent: Exactly.

Dave: They do everything. They do skiing.

Laurent: They have the sea kayaking and the river rafting, and the ski during the winter season. This is our physical affinity and emotional affinity with this community of people with disabilities. But maybe to answer your question Jeff, you let me know if I answer your question, I think that the moment we understood that we're dealing with something much bigger than we anticipated, is then when we joined an organization called ENAT, E-N-A-T, it's basically this network of companies and entities and non-profit that are all pushing accessible travel. They're based in Europe. It's a European organization, but with membership from all over the world. We applied for membership. We had discussion with a person driving this organization, his name is Ivor Ambrose, and right away he connected us with like-minded organizations from all over the world.

Laurent: Right away, we started to get those requests again from groups and companies in France and Scandinavia, in Australia, in England. This is the moment we understood that there is an opportunity, it's a big opportunity, and guess what? Nobody is doing it. At the time we were basically the only one doing what we do today. Even today, there are only a handful companies that do what we do. Truly a handful for a huge demand of accessible travel.

Dave: You mentioned there weren't many people doing this so No Barriers, we partnered with ETC once. We went down and did some sea kayaking in the Sea of Cortes, and we brought folks in chairs and just getting to the restaurant, no accessible rooms. We had to carry people into their rooms. No accessible showers. How to get people on the boats. Special kayaks without rigors and things like that. Special seats. There is so much to learn. Special wheelchairs for the beach so you can wheel around relatively independently. It was this massive learning curve. We

like to think about what those barriers are so you must have thought a lot about what those barriers are.

Laurent: The learning curve is very steep, but you have to learn very, very quickly, as I'm sure you know. The margins for error when you're traveling with a disability is almost non-existent, and you have to build in your travel plans. So much redundancies and so much plan B, plan C, plan D. Imagine doing that for a group of 20 people. 10 of them need wheelchairs. Families and so forth. 20 people and they ask you to take them on a tour of all the big national parks of the US Southwest. Grand Canyon, [inaudible 00:18:20] Lake Powell for two weeks. What I'm describing right now is kind of a typical tour trip that we do with groups coming from France or [inaudible 00:18:32] Britain, Israel.

Laurent: Imagine the complexity of finding hotels in each of those five or six destinations, the vehicles that will accommodate the different types of disabilities, who gets to sit in the wheelchair during transport. Who wants to transfer into regular seat? Finding rooms that are with a roll-in shower or that making sure they have the ramps and the [inaudible 00:18:57] chairs and the under straps so we can push and pull people down the Virgin River in Zion. You can imagine the complexity of putting something like that together, but the rewards are amazing. I'm not just talking about the financial reward. It's great in itself, but it's great to know that we actually help people that would not be able to experience those amazing landscapes, those amazing experiences unless we were here. I'm patting myself on the back right now.

Laurent: I know it's extremely self-promotional on my part, but that's such a reward. To know that we actually are opening those experiences to people that will not be able to do it unless they could work with someone like us. I wish there were more like us, it would make my life easier.

Jeff: On that note Laurent, I know there's thousands of travel companies around the world. Do you have instances where, perhaps, a potential client has reached out to a travel organization and the agency has said, "We would love to be able to accommodate you, but we don't know how to do this. Maybe we need to partner with someone." Are you finding that sort of standard, run of the mill travel agencies are reaching out to you to try to partner because they realize there's a big market?

Laurent: Constantly. We get requests and we get referrals, and we accommodate many, many clients. I call them guests. Many guests are coming to us through their relationship with a company in their country or even here in the US, that can not or doesn't have the experience to accommodate the needs of the client. No doubt. What is very encouraging on our part is to see that overseas, I haven't seen that yet in the US, but overseas you have major travel companies that are developing their own, full fledged, accessible travel entities or departments maybe within the company itself. They do that very often in connection with us because we have the expertise, we have the connection, we have the list of details that they call [inaudible 00:21:13] The guides, whatever the case may be.

Laurent: We do partner also with those companies from overseas that now are specializing in accessible travel. Again, I will mention again that connection with the ENAT in Europe. They're very good at making sure that all those companies know each other and connect with each other to serve their communities.

Dave: Laurent, I was just going to ask. We at No Barriers, we travel all over the world. I know that you have a program, for example, in India. We've had experience when we are doing these programs in developing countries, which is often a focus for us that it adds a whole other level of complexity, not only in terms of the resources that might be available on site in developing countries, but also in terms of

the stigma against people with disabilities in some of those countries that we might visit that is a different level than you would have in US travel. I wonder if you experienced that as well, and if you could talk a little bit about it?

Laurent: Absolutely. Some countries are better than others, obviously. Some countries are extremely welcoming to accessible travel. Often it is a business [inaudible 00:22:27] Maybe it's part of their philosophy, their way of life, whatever, but in many destination it is a business [inaudible 00:22:36] Portugal is the greatest nation to visit in Europe. The accessibility is getting better and better every year. They are doing a tremendous effort to make many of their main tourist sites, castles, monasteries, churches accessible, and vehicles and guides and so forth. I will mention again, Portugal is a great example of a country that is adopting, embracing accessible travel.

Laurent: India, it's the beginning of the road. India is an amazing country, amazing culture. We spent three weeks in India scouting, visiting every single destination, talking to guides, taking measurements of 51 hotel rooms. 51 hotels. I can't imagine that we actually did that. But that's the way we basically are working with these nations. In the US, certainly, but overseas the burden becomes even heavier because and again, plan B, plan C, plan D, the margin of error is minimal so in India we spent three weeks before we felt comfortable enough that we can offer this destination to our guests.

Laurent: In India, the basic infrastructure is lacking. They don't have a ADA code that we can look at and decide what to do. Even in the [inaudible 00:24:06] three, four and five hotels in [inaudible 00:24:09] Maybe those hotels will have one, two accessible rooms, and then maybe another two or three that pretend to be accessible, but not really. In India, we traveled with a lot of equipment. We sent equipment to be on site there when we arrived there. It's almost like a military operation.

Laurent: India they want to do it, but they don't know yet exactly how to do it in their tourism industry. Working with this entity to try and develop the means to do it. Other countries, they want to do it, but they don't get it yet. I don't want to badmouth any other country in Europe, but Icha, my wife was invited to talk to the [inaudible 00:24:54] Tourism Bureau about how to develop their accessible tourism. She spent three days speaking to the people there about it. They have the desire because they know it's a business, but the basic understanding of what disability means and accessibility means, it's not there yet. It's a very early [inaudible 00:25:16] conversation with some of these nations.

Laurent: That was a long answer to your short question.

Dave: No, that's really fascinating though. It sounds like there's this balancing act, right? Because sometimes, like in Europe, the infrastructure is already built, right, and maybe the infrastructure may not change radically or in India or maybe it's like a lot of money to really do things perfectly so you're probably doing a lot of jury rigging, right? You're probably doing a lot of adaptation. What's the balancing act there? Do you tell folks, "Hey, everything is not going to be perfect. You have to have a willingness to be a bit of a guinea pig or a bit of a pioneer if something doesn't go right."

Laurent: That's a great question, and this is an issue, not only for India, [inaudible 00:26:07] Even here, in the US, when we go to New York or Las Vegas or Los Angeles, what have you, we try to make sure that our guests understand the challenges and understand that not every street is flat, and here there will be some incline, and here we'll have to transfer you. We try to manage expectations and we

try to explain as much as we can to our guests, what to expect. What are the possible challenges? And we trust them. Not every guest will accept to be handled and transferred from their chair and manually lowered into the Virgin River when you get to Zion. Some of them will say absolutely. The reward of being able to sit with my feet in the river, with everybody else, it's worth me being uncomfortable being carried by a bunch of people down the steep steps.

Laurent: I'll just say it's a balancing act, but this is why we try to work very closely with our guests. We don't have pre-packaged trips that we impose on anybody.

There is a tremendous amount of customization and tailoring and discussion with a guest, again, to make sure that they will get the full benefit and the full reward of the experiences. It's built around the person. It's not built around the destination. It's the person is going to experience. That is the primary factor in everything that we do.

Erik: As a business owner and someone who is advocating that there is a lot of business out there, do you have a sense of how big the market is for accessible travel?

Laurent: I'm going to throw a number that I've heard and I've checked. It was based on some research done by University of, in England. I can't remember exactly. I won't be able to credit that person now, but when we started a few years ago, the number that was commonly used was 13 billion, with a b, dollars in accessible travel in the US alone. Granted, that includes accessible hotels, tours, guides, whatever the case may be, but that was the number that at the time was given. \$13 billion, with a b. I can only assure that this has grown exponentially because you have more and more people from overseas traveling into the US, and from the US traveling overseas.

Laurent: It became over the years a little bit more easier, for a person with disability to travel and actually find hotel rooms that they would need, and find the guide that will and the vehicle. It is becoming easier, and hopefully that is a trajectory. I'm sure the market is much, much larger than that today.

Jeff: I'm curious about your guides. The guides you have and just from looking into your website. I know you have a wide range of guides because...

Erik: It's an incredible list of resources, amazing experts, right?

Jeff: Really, like [inaudible 00:29:21] and wildlife naturalists, and winemakers and hospitality. You've got over [inaudible 00:29:26] so you've got all this wide spectrum of specialists. Do these guides, I guess, do they fundamentally have something in them that where they want to be involved in this particular community?

Laurent: Absolutely.

Jeff: They have a passion for it, right?

Laurent: Unequivocally, yes. All the people that we work with, and sometimes we start working with a person that they have no prior experience with disabilities, but they all work with us because they want to work with us. They want to work with this specific audience, this specific community, and it's across the board. As long as you come with that spirit that you want to be part of that, it works.

Laurent: Again, I will give some credit back to ETC, Erik. We know that we can train people that have no prior experience and very quickly they will understand what the issues are. It starts with how to address a person physically and what are the words that you should be using and the attitude, and all the way to the physical aspect of how to handle somebody, how to touch somebody, even touching the wheelchair of a person, sometimes it's an issue. We try to chain and work with the people that eventually work with us on all those levels, but again, to answer your question, Jeff,

unequivocally yes. The people that work with us they work with us because they want to be part of that movement. No doubt about it. No doubt.

Laurent: I can give you so many examples, even people that it is not their primary job. They never thought they would be doing something like that, and it's an amazing experience.

Jeff: And you had to go through that training yourself, right? You had no prior experience so did you have mobility experts that were there for you as you were part of the learning process?

Laurent: Yes. The answer again is yes. We were blessed with a number of friends in our local community here, in the Bay Area, people in wheelchairs that we've known each other for many, many years and they are our guides. They tell us what to do and what not to do. When we look at opening a new destination or a new excursion adventure, I will say to Nicole, she's in a wheelchair, "Hey Nicole, do you want to do something crazy? Do you want to go speed boating on the Bay for a day or two? Do you want to try this crazy hike on [inaudible 00:32:01] because you're in a wheelchair, I'm not." Again, we're blessed with all those fantastic people that will come with us and will give us their perspective of doing what we are eventually going to offer to the wider community. They give us their feedback as a person in a wheelchair or any other type of disability.

Erik: Folks in wheelchairs we've eluded to and talked a little bit about, but I heard there's like this whole, that you guys do a lot of stuff with blind people and deaf people. I can speak, personally as a blind person, sometimes you miss out on the visuals when you're out there traveling. I was sea kayaking and this scuba guy, or actually no, he was just a free diver in Hawaii and he went down and got an octopus off the seafloor and brought it up and let me touch it. That kind of thing is so special, right? I know you've done a lot of thinking around that too. How to make visual things maybe tactile or more experiential.

Laurent: We try, but I will be the first to admit that just because of the people that are coming to us and what they perceive we can do. The visual impairment and the hearing impairment, is a fairly small portion of our overall audience, our overall community of guests. The vast majority are coming to us with some mobility issues.

Laurent: Having said so, when we have groups from the US, as much as from France and Switzerland very often, the mobility issue might be related or will have some aspects of both visual and hearing impairment. We have many guests that have gone through some traumatic accident or some other form of trauma, and we will have to address those issues. I have to tell you that in the past we even had a number of guests that are coming to us with the expectation that we'll be able to assist them in mobility requirements. I'm not completely comfortable disclosing their, for example, their visual impairment. It's a challenge. It's a challenge. It's a personal issue for many people the way they perceive their own disabilities, and their comfort level of expressing to us what they would require to make their experience comfortable. It's a difficult issue. It's a human issue.

Laurent: Some people are very open, and very forward in saying, "I need this, this and that." Sometimes the person arrives and then we learn that there is more that they need, and we try to address that as rapidly as possible. Again, going back to the visual impairment, we had a number of cases where we realized once the person is actually with us, traveling, obviously they'll hear that we have to address also those issues.

Erik: A lot of people show up they don't know what they need, right? Because they've never traveled, maybe.

Laurent: Exactly. That's exactly right. Yes.

Dave: Laurent, where can people go to learn more about the programs that you offer?

Laurent: We have website, which is a nice website, I think. It has a great bunch of pictures. My wife is also a professional photographer so 90% of the pictures. You're going to see our website, she took. We have a website, we have a Facebook, we have an Instagram. I will be the first to admit that I am horrible. I am such a bad social media person. I approach this entire world with a combination of awe and fear, but we recently hired Shannon Kelly to be our social media director so hopefully we'll be able to have more presence online.

Laurent: We partner, we connect with organizations again, such as No Barriers. We make sure that we involve as much as time permits in advocacy of accessible travel and overall accessibility and inclusiveness. That's the way people learn about what we do. It's a double-edged sword, David. On one end, we are so busy. We are very successful. We're growing. I am tremendously happy with what we do. I know we're leaving a lot of money on the table just because I don't have the time to address different things that we should be doing.

Laurent: It might be early to talk about it, but we are looking to partner with a very, very large organization. They're not a travel company, per se, but definitely have a very large audience, and we're looking to partner with them at some point this year, and that will definitely open up and make what we do, accessible travel, accessibility, more mainstream, if you will. [inaudible 00:36:59] into those details, but to answer your question we have a presence. It could be a much better presence, but we are already doing a lot.

Laurent: What I would love to do eventually is to make sure we can partner and work with other organizations, and make sure that we can convey to them and work together so they can benefit from our experience, what we feel so they can take off. Again, and enlarge the pie, and enlarge the offerings of accessible travel to more and more people.

Dave: I find something interesting, that you start out as a travel company for people with disabilities, but then you really move into this whole realm of being a thought leader because sort of bringing and learning new things. Now you're advocating, you're running workshops, it sounds like you're working with foreign entities to make things more accessible. Can you speak about that realm of the business?

Laurent: Definitely. It goes hand in hand, very frankly, and there is no disconnect between the two, in my mind. Maybe again, it's not false humility, believe me. When we created Tapooz Travel, I swear we really just wanted to take people wine testing. That was all I wanted to do, but I love what we do. I love what we do, but it's going to sound weird, but we're not working 24/7 because of the financial reward. What is truly driving us is the most larger view of us, our community, our country, our world and our Earth. I can go on and on and on. We do what we do because we believe that it's right. Inclusiveness is what we need to have, and Tapooz Travel is a commercial entity. Our activities in advocacy, they basically are fitting into and serving what Icha and I think we should be doing at our stage of our life, our careers and simply our position in our community and the world we live in.

Jeff: Did you have any idea it would grow at the rate that it has? I know, clearly you knew there was a market there, but did you anticipate this or was it sort of one of those be careful what you ask for, and now you're like, "Wow! We're in it, man."

Laurent: We started panicking very quickly. All jokes apart, yes, we understood very early on that there was a lot more demand than we had anticipated, a lot more

destinations, a lot more travel, a lot more people than I thought we would be serving. When I say we, we started to panic, we are in a constant state of controlled panic, controlled chaos and controlled panic because we receive on a daily basis, certainly on a weekly basis, inquiries literally from all over the place. Asking us to do this, asking us to do that, and trying to partner, and again, there is a fine line between wanting to grow the company and make it as successful as I can because again, it serves our vision, our purpose, and deciding to take it to the next level, which hopefully will happen this year.

Laurent: But mentally, physically, emotionally, professionally, I ask myself if I'm ready for that. I look back at when we started, and when we wanted just to go on wine testing and where we are today. At the time you don't say no, you say yes, and then you figure it out. This is again, where we are. It's like a full cycle. We are at a place where we say, "I don't want to say no because if we truly believe in what we do, we should really take it to the next level."

Jeff: You were like trying to retire, instead you're busier than you ever were.

Laurent: That won't happen anymore. I think I abandoned this idea.

Jeff: Good luck with that. I don't think you're wired to retire.

Laurent: I don't think so. Again, I was naïve. I saw myself as this gentleman farmer going and drinking wine all day. That is not going to happen.

Jeff: You've got plenty of time for that. In the meantime, you've got to transform the world.

Dave: This is a crazy question. This is my last question. Do you think maybe at some point you could do such a great job that you could put yourself out of business? Do you know what I mean, with the world changing, with all of these technologies like eBikes and just with the world changing as it is, it's maybe becoming more accessible or do you think that's not going to happen for a long time?

Laurent: We're still a long way away, I think. I don't know if I want to put that in years or whatever, but we're still a long way away from the world becoming completely accessible and inclusive. We're not there yet. There are very encouraging signs. It's getting better all the time, but we're not here yet. And we're certainly not there yet across the globe. We're getting better in the US, but again, it's spotty. Some destinations are way better than others. Some are still very difficult. Sometimes it's the attitude of the people in this particular part of the US.

Laurent: I want to tell you, we just came back from two trips, back to back into the deep South of the US. That, in itself, is an amazing experience, but we took two groups. One from France and one from Switzerland, each of them on an almost two week road trip starting in Memphis down Mississippi following the river, but with vehicles and into New Orleans. Memphis is tremendous. The attitude of the people, even what they try to do with accessibility, just amazing. I didn't expect that.

Fantastic.

Laurent: Mississippi, that's a different animal in itself, but we found some small communities that are not ready yet for accessibility, but the attitude of the people, the desire to work with our community was amazing. I will go back and I will work with those people over there to make sure that we can bring more and more people because they have a culture, they have a history. They have so much stuff that nobody's thinking of going there. Certainly not a person in a wheelchair. New Orleans is fantastic. I don't want to be tempted about talking about New Orleans, but going back to the deep South, again, it connects with what we do.

Laurent: Why would I bring groups of people in Russia into the deep South? Well, first of all because it's good for the soul, it's good for the body. It's great to be able to

connect. Two communities that have no affinity with each other, that have no clue about each other, that have no idea about the culture of each other, and when you see it with people from France in wheelchair and you are in this [inaudible 00:44:23] and some guy shows up with his guitar because he heard that we're sitting in that juke joint, shows up with his guitar because he knew BB King, and he wanted to play a few songs that he knew. You know what? That's the reward. This is why we do what we do.

Jeff: Dude! That's the greatest story, ever! I love that, man. Did your people have a blast down there? I can't imagine.

Laurent: Oh my God. Oh my God. They go back home and that's the multiplayer effect. That's why going and drinking wine in the wine country it's great, but the multiplayer effect is not necessarily there, but when you have people that experience this other experience and they go back home and they talk about it, that's the multiplayer effect. Then you have more people wanting to do that. Their family suddenly wants to talk. [inaudible 00:45:24] There are members that want to do more of that. People in Indiana and Mississippi they say, "Bring us more. This is great. We want to work with you guys."

Laurent: Especially, in the political world that we live and having those connections between different communities that don't necessarily understand each other or even like each other, it's tremendous. It really is good for what we do.

Dave: Laurent, it's been a wonderful conversation about accessibility and inclusivity and the power of travel to connect people. What is your website that people can go to, if they would like to book a trip with Tapooz.

Laurent: www.TapoozTravel.com. T-A-P-O-O-Z Travel.com.

Dave: As always, anything that was referenced in this podcast, we'll include in the show notes some links to ENAT, for example at AccessibleTourism.org. We appreciate your time and your energy and your passion for travel. It is something that is near and dear to our hearts at No Barriers. We are so thankful for our partnership with you over the years. Thank you, Laurent.

Laurent: Thank you. The honor is mine. Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Erik: Keep fighting the good fight, Laurent. The world is a better place because of what you're doing.

Laurent: Thank you. I appreciate that. All right. Thank you much.

Dave: Erik, Jeff, another great conversation. Something that we've done a lot of together. Accessible travel all over the world. One thing that stood out for me was this idea of when we first started doing the work we're doing at No Barriers, we had no idea what we were doing when we took our first group of blindly sighted kids to Peru and [inaudible 00:47:07] We just kind of winged the whole thing, and did some things on that trip that I can't believe we did, but learned in the process. It is so fun to hear an entrepreneur that has that same mentality. You know what we're going to figure it out. Jeff, what stood out for you?

Jeff: Well there was a lot. I took all these notes, and then I just threw them all away with that last story because that was just the moment when it really galvanized for me what Laurent's doing on a deeper level, right? And his whole company and everyone. It would be amiss to not mention all the guides and all the folks that he has with relationships that he's created, but so you've got this group of accessibly challenged folks from France who already have perhaps a particular octave about the US, let's just be honest. Then you take them down to the deep South, which those are my people. Part of my understanding who my people are, is also understanding my issues that we have on our team, so to speak, and then throws

them right into this cultural melting pot that I would think there would be resistance, and maybe there was.

Jeff: But what he's doing, is not just providing accessibility for folks that are his guests. He's also teaching a cultural shift to Mississippians and Louisianans. The folks who perhaps haven't really had an opportunity to embrace mobility and accessibility and differing human beings. He's connecting dots in a way to make everyone of us human. I think that that is the biggest takeaway that I got from it. It's so powerful. I'm just grateful for people like Laurent.

Dave: Awesome. How about you Erik?

Erik: The nuts and bolts of obviously just how people with disabilities get out there because it's so scary. It's so scary to get out there so I just love the nuts and bolts ideas of how to do that. That this podcast, we just did a little bit of illuminating with Laurent how it's possible. Then expounding on that idea, Jeff, of connections because it really is. Laurent has these connections. He grows up with this really cool life, lots of travel. At some point realizes how inaccessible the world is and how much connection people are missing out of, and so he allows himself, instead of just doing wine tours, to get sucked down this rabbit hole. Because of that he's changing the world. He's impacting the world.

Erik: One of my goals for this podcast is to multiply that, and to have 1000 people get inspired by somebody like Laurent, and say, "I'm going to let myself be sucked down the rabbit hole." Because that's what life is about. I want to do something that's impacting the world.

Dave: The impactful rabbit holes.

Erik: Yeah.

Dave: And if you're listening thinking, I want to go down the impactful rabbit hole, shameless self promotion here, September 18th in San Francisco, our annual No Barriers Summit, which challenges you to find your invincible self, where you too can meet Laurent and partake in some of the activities that we do there, hear some incredible speakers and sit side by side with others who have struggled with living a life of purpose despite the barriers in their way. You can learn more about that at NoBarriersSummit.org, September 18th at Oracle Park in San Francisco.

Dave: As always, if you want to support No Barriers, one of the best things you can do is share this podcast with a friend, and like it on our page. We appreciate your time listening to us and listening to another great conversation. Thank you Jeff and thank you, Erik.

Erik: Awesome, Dave. No Barriers.

Jeff: Thanks you guys. See you next time.

Dave: Thanks for all of you for listening to our podcast, we know that you have a lot of choices about how you can spend your time so we appreciate you spending it with us. If you enjoy this podcast, we encourage to subscribe to it, share it and give us a review. Show notes can be found at NoBarriersPodcast.com . Special thanks to the Dan Ryan Band for our intro song, which is called Guidance. The production team behind this podcast include producers [inaudible 00:51:29] Sound design, editing and mixing by Tyler Kotman, graphics by Sam Davis and marketing support by Lower Baldwin and Jamie [inaudible 00:51:38] Thanks to all of you amazing people for the great work you do.