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Family denied flight due to disability

Vanderhorsts looking into legal action
September 06, 2012 10:06 AM

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By EMILY SHAPIRO
eshapiro@portervillerecorder.com

The Robert Vanderhorst family say they will take legal action against American Airlines for refusing to allow them to fly due to what they claim is discrimination against their son Bede, who has Down Syndrome.

"They [American Airlines] looked at us, looked at our son and said not on our plane" said Robert Vanderhorst, Bede's father. Vanderhorst is a Porterville attorney.

Bede Vanderhorst is a 16-year-old freshman at Granite Hills High School.

Robert Vanderhorst, with emotion in his voice, explained what happened to his family at Newark (New Jersey) Liberty International Airport on Sunday.

After upgrading their tickets for a flight from Newark to Los Angeles to first class at a kiosk, the family stopped to see if they could obtain two seats together as their first class ticket seats were in separate rows.

After making a request to rearrange the seating, so that either Robert or his wife, Joan, could sit with Bede, and receiving new tickets, the family headed to the gate. When it came for them to board, though, the situation quickly spun out of control.

The family was told by airline personnel that their son's supposed behavior in the waiting area created a security risk and they would not be allowed to board.

"We never got on the plane," explained Robert Vanderhorst.

The airline has a different take.

"The young man was agitated and running around the gate area prior to boarding flight 119 from Newark to Los Angeles on Sunday evening. Our pilot noticed and asked a Customer Service Manager to talk to the family to see if we could help him calm down and get better acclimated to the situation. That effort was ultimately unsuccessful, and we made the decision to have the family rebooked on a different flight out of concern for the young man's safety and the safety of others. The family chose not to fly American, so we helped re-accommodate them on another carrier's flight to Los Angeles," stated Matt Miller, media relations for American Airlines, in an e-mail to The Recorder.

Robert Vanderhorst refutes the claim wholeheartedly.

"No employee ever talked to us or interacted with Bede," he stated. During the situation Bede could see that his mother was visibly upset and became worried. Published reports indicate that the family has cell phone video of Bede acting calmly which the airline says was taken during a calm moment.

The family was then booked on a United Airlines flight where they were placed in a segregated zone, in coach, at the very back of the plane.

"They put us in the very back seat and kept two or three rows in front of us, a back of the bus, and then we were treated this way," Robert Vanderhorst added.

The family intends to pursue legal action including; talking to a lawyer and seeking the appropriate action.



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Bede Vanderhorst shows off his Special Olympics medal. Bede and his family were not allowed to board an American Airlines flight on Sunday due to what the family deems was discrimination against their son as he has Down Syndrome.

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Robert Vanderhorst's goal is to make sure that people are treated fairly.

"I want American Airlines, United, and all the airlines to train their pilots and staff to treat people with respect," said Robert Vanderhorst.

To help in the family's fight for justice, state Sen. Michael J. Rubio (D-Shafter) and Best Buddies International Founder and Chairman Anthony Shriver sent a letter to American Airlines CEO Tom Horton requesting action. Furthermore, Rubio demanded that American Airlines provide sensitivity training, a public apology and full compensation to the family.

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Heather Cline · San Jose, California

It's such a shame for the family to be treated that way by two air line. Shame on United and American Airlines.

Reply · 3 · Like · September 7, 2012 at 10:20am



Kim DeBoer Jones · Residential Service Provider at Self-employed, the only way to go!

I find American airlines stand on this totally disgusting! Wrong in so many ways!

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Glory Dawn Connor · Porterville, California

thats not right

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Francie Pound Hazen · Somis, California

Disgusting is a good word for it.

Reply · 1 · Like · September 6, 2012 at 10:37am



Lori Perrin

i heard it on the radio this morning...i cant believe what this world has come to..i hope that family

Reply · Like · September 6, 2012 at 11:20am

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Dorinda Lugo Gwinn Baker · Top Commenter

How sad , I too have a brother(Oscar) with Down Syndrome and I've also saw the video on youtube of Bede , same, when he get's a hat , he can sit for hours fixing his hat and taking it off his head, I don't yet it about the on the plane but what about him in the airport lobby? I bet if they did it would be the same as the youtube vid

Reply · 1 · Like · September 6, 2012 at 5:06pm



Juanita Flores

that is so not right, isn't that discriminating

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Dorinda Lugo Gwinn Baker · Top Commenter

True and if you saw the video,you will see Bede playing with his hat just like Oscar does.

Reply · Like · September 6, 2012 at 7:10pm



Dorothy Eversole Arellano · Porterville, California

That is So wrong



Reply · 1 Like · September 7, 2012 at 8:06am



Barry Caplan · Top Commenter

> Published reports indicate that the family has cell phone video of Bede acting calmly which the airline says wa

The cell phone video is all over the internet, having been broadcast on the news programs of tv stations in New

Reply · 1 Like · September 6, 2012 at 11:13am



Jess Collins · Porterville, California

wow! what a shame!

Reply · 1 Like · September 8, 2012 at 12:31pm

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