

Inside Stories: An Elevated Perspective

Scott Simmie:

<00:00:04> 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 chair back is in an exceedingly comfortable position and that you're ready for a very special voyage with a very special person.

[Music]

Scott Simmie:

<00:00:37> 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.

Kelly Lepley:

<00:00:46> Oh, you're welcome. It's nice to meet you, Scott.

Scott Simmie:

<00:00:48> Nice to meet you as well. Listen, tell us what you do for a living.

Kelly Lepley:

<00:00:53> I fly planes for a living for a company called UPS as a Captain on a Boeing 747.

Scott Simmie:

<00:01:00> Wow! How long have you been doing this, and how did you get started?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:01:05> Oh, that's a great question. I've 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. I learned how to fly on small airplanes. I'd go to high school in the morning, I would go to college in the afternoon and I learned to fly on the weekends and just slowly worked my way up the ladder flying small airplanes all the way up to the Boeing 747.

Scott Simmie:

<00:01:30> And so you started taking lessons when you were 17, was that something that had appealed to you even before then?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:01:36> Oh, 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:

<00:01:52> 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:02:00> I gave up counting after 15,000.

Scott Simmie:

<00:02:02> Tell me, Kelly, where do you typically fly?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:02:05> We fly all over the world. On a 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 centres to the smaller cities and smaller airplanes.

Scott Simmie:

<00:02:26> And is the cargo similar or, I guess, just like anything else, it could be different cargo every time, is that correct?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:02:33> It could be different cargo any time.

Scott Simmie:

<00:02:34> And what's it been like since the pandemic? Have things changed for you at all in this job?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:02:40> 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:

<00:02:55> 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:03:03> Well, we can carry up to roughly 300,000 pounds in the 747, and a lot of my understanding is PPE's, we were carrying in Asia at that point in time. But we've carried PPE's, ventilators and everything of that sort. As pilots, unfortunately, we don't get a cargo manifest of what the 300,000 pounds is below us. It's only a small percentage we really get to see.

Scott Simmie:

<00:03:27> You know, when you think about doctors and nurses and people working in these essential services as kind of 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, you know, anything different going on in your mind when you know just how valuable this cargo is?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:04:00> 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:

<00:04:17> Has the protocol at airports for you changed, or protocols in the cockpit? Have those sorts of things changed due to COVID-19?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:04:24> 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 are 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 that we've definitely increased the protocol there. And, of course, we're in our PPE's when we're in the airport situations and stuff like that around people or populations masses we will, you know, wear that. And so it has changed to that point there, yes.

Scott Simmie:

<00:04:58> 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:05:12> 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:

<00:05:44> And if you're going to a destination, say in Asia, are you typically at the other end for sort of a single night before flying back or does that vary as well?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:05:53> It varies. We can have as short as 18 hours all the way up to 72, 96. It just depends on how the schedule is built for that specific pairing.

Scott Simmie:

<00:06:03> 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.

Kelly Lepley:

<00:06:11> Oh, of course. We're always – it seems 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 travelling 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:

<00:06:29> You know, a friend of mine is 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 kind of major layoffs within the airline industry. What are you hearing from other pilots whose careers have been put on hold by COVID-19?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:06:52> I think we're all a little anxious at the moment; we really don't know what to expect. There's really – there's no playbook on this one, so it's really hard to understand how it's going to pan out in the long term. But yeah, we're – I think many of my peers are very anxious about what does the future hold for the aviation world.

Scott Simmie:

<00:07:10> 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:07:21> 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, you know, in the aviation world in 9/11, and there is really no playbook, again, what to expect going forward from here.

Scott Simmie:

<00:07:44> 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:07:54> Well, the first thing that I tell them is to look at the programs. Look at, you know, 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 ten years, I worked on my four-year program. And from then, got hired at companies and worked up the ladder. It just depends on your determination. If there's a will, there's a way. Some people can afford a high 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.

<00:08:35> 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 is 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:

<00:08:58> 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:09:17> I've spoken at woman's groups, I've spoken in front of an 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:

<00:09:32> You know, 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 is 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:10:03> 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 we 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 have come up to me from all walks of life to thank 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:

<00:10:34> Any tips? And this is slightly on and slightly off topic, but any tips for those of use who suffer tremendous jet lag when flying? Because you obviously are hitting other time zones and turning right around.

Kelly Lepley:

<00:10:46> I sleep in four-hour increments, and so when it comes to when I'm on 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 2:00 in the morning in Hong Kong, I'm wide awake. And then when it's 2:00 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 it takes – 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:

<00:11:30> 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:11:41> 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 to 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:

<00:12:24> What do your daughters think of your career?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:12:27> 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:

<00:12:39> 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:12:47> 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 harbour 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. Or to go – after that we went and did ice climbing. We climbed a glacier off in Kenecott, Alaska. Everything is so massive, it's so big, it's so beautiful, it's just an incredible place to visit.

Scott Simmie:

<00:13:32> I was following your travels on Twitter and I saw one post where you were lowered into some sort of fissure in a glacier. What was happening there? And tell us what you saw.

Kelly Lepley:

<00:13:44> It's called a moulin. And my understanding – and my very limited understanding of a moulin, is when a glacier, when there's a soft spot in a glacier and the waters melt, 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 is extremely – it's the most beautiful blue colour you could imagine. It's the most terrifying thing I probably have 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 have to climb back out of it. But it was probably the most exhilarating experience I've ever done.

Scott Simmie:

<00:14:30> How low were you lowered?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:14:32> We were only lowered 15 feet, to about where the blue ice starts. Because once you get down below the blue ice, it's extremely hard. 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 experience people. But it was enough where I could get down there and see how beautiful it was.

Scott Simmie:

<00:14:50> What is the best part about being a pilot?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:14:54> 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 cultures and see people. There's so much about flying that I love, but I guess the ability, now being Captain, is now having the ability to, I guess, to teach, to mentor the next cadre of pilots that are coming through as First Officers that will ultimately be Captains as well. That's probably one of the things I really enjoy doing.

Scott Simmie:

<00:15:35> And what about the 747 itself? What's that like to fly?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:15:39> 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 crews on long-haul flights. It's just an absolutely beautiful airplane and one incredible machine that Boeing has put together.

Scott Simmie:

<00:16:19> 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. Does it ever get old for you? You've been doing it now since, as you said, you were 17.

Kelly Lepley:

<00:16:40> No, it never gets old because every day is a new day. I will leave a blizzard here in Alaska and I will head down south into Hong Kong and I'll be dodging thunderstorms. So there's always – 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 am I going to react? So your mind is constantly working throughout the process, throughout the flight on how to best navigate the situations before you that you have no playbook before. You're just basically going out and whatever is handed to you, you react to.

Scott Simmie:

<00:17:15> These was something you said earlier on when you were talking about speeches you're 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 is one particular challenge that you often tell people about or if there is 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:17:43> 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 with 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, you know, being a homosexual or anything like that, being gay, lesbian, transgender, was a sin. And so I learned to hide it. I learned to suppress it. And throughout my life, I focussed on flying. That's what made my – that's what made me successful in my career, is I focussed on something that I loved, and flying has been something I've always wanted to do.

<00:18:20> 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 as a person. 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 2000, 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?

<00:19:18> And I began spending 10 years of research to understand what is gender dysphoria. Is it something I created or is it 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.

<00:19:41> 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, and 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." 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 I was suicidal by any means, no, it was like, I spent every waking moment in my life focussed on something that I needed to be to fit in societal norms, and it took a toll on my life.

<00:20:25> And he said this one phrase and I'll never forget it. He said, "You have one life. 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 real 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." And from that point forward, He did.

<00:21:04> 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 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. Whether 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 listens to this is: What are we doing with our lives? Are we living it to our fullest or are we living it for others?

<00:21:45> And I had to come to the conclusion that I can't continue to live my life for others because in doing so I've lost myself.

Scott Simmie:

<00:21:56> You can see my face; I want to thank you for sharing that. 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, you know, 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?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:22:52> 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.

<00:23:35> He overcame huge obstacles and was able to successfully decode what the Germans were doing through his machine. And in doing so, he saved the world from World War II continuing. He saved millions of lives and the cost of many millions of dollars. But society saw unfit to look at that and they focussed 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, you know, 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.

<00:24:15> 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'd like to share with people.

Scott Simmie:

<00:24:29> Thank you so much, Kelly. Now, you've never heard this sound before, at least not coming from me. But this sound [chime] 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!

<00:24:52> What is your favourite aircraft?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:24:54> Oh, the 747.

Scott Simmie:

<00:24:56> What is your favourite movie that involves flight?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:25:00> Airplane.

Scott Simmie:

<00:25:01> Does driving seem boring after flying?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:25:04> I have a hard time driving the speed limit.

Scott Simmie:

<00:25:07> You're from Alaska, what type of insect repellent do you use?

Kelly Lepley:

<00:25:11> That's a great question. I've yet to find one that's successful.

Scott Simmie:

<00:25:15> Kelly Lepley. Listen, thank you so much for sharing your story and for being so deeply honest and true and true to yourself.

Kelly Lepley:

<00:25:24> Thank you.

[Music]

Scott Simmie:

<00:25:31> You know, I've 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.

<00:25:55> If you liked Kelly, her Twitter handle is @kclepley, and that is spelled kilo, Charlie, Lima, echo, poppa, Lima, echo, Yankee.

<00:26:09> Kelly's inside story certainly touched me, and I truly hope it touched you. I'm Scott Simmie, and it's been a pleasure flying with you today.

Female voice:

<00:26:24> The views expressed here are those of the participants and not those of Bank of Montreal, its affiliates or subsidiaries.

<End of recording>