



case study

Virtual Photo Walks: Zooming People With Disabilities Around the World

In 2012, John Butterill took a sick friend on a nature walk. But the friend wasn't walking alongside him; the friend was video conferencing on his phone, looking at the natural surroundings as John carried the device through the woods. John realized something that day: If he could help this one person whose health had kept him confined and isolated, he could help them all with virtual discovery services.

That very same day Butterill founded Virtual Photo Walks, a service that allows a person living with disabilities or an illness to travel the world in real time on virtual tours. Virtual Photo Walks Inc is a nonprofit public charity 501c3 in the U.S. Thanks to video conferencing providers like Zoom and a group of dedicated virtual volunteer guides from all over the world, Virtual Photo Walks is able to make the world bigger and brighter for a community of people with disabilities.

Challenge

Virtual Photo Walks is a simple premise: Through virtual volunteer guides equipped with mobile phones, the disabled can participate in immersive, real-life experiences of places they will likely never see firsthand – a nature park, volcano, museum, antique car show, backstage at the symphony, archery competition, or anywhere else. Virtual Photo Walks conducts private and group events every week.

A tour can be one-on-one when it's a requested event for a terminally ill patient, or it can be for a small group. Each also is highly tailored. For example, they have virtually taken a group of World War II veterans too ill to travel to see the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., while

Virtual Photo Walks

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– John Butterill
Founder of Virtual Photo Walks

their friends attended in person so they could experience the memorial together. “We start with where people want to go,” Butterill explained, “and then we try to make that happen.”

Many participants return again and again. Butterill spoke of one woman who has immune deficiencies. She cannot leave her house for risk of contracting an illness. She has attended many virtual outings.

“We’ve built a community,” Butterill said. “People will be disappointed if we don’t show up. Disabled people are so used to being disappointed, to being taken advantage of. So when it is free, and it takes them wherever they want to go, they can hardly believe it. But it’s real!”

However, streaming from these beautiful and unique places and events can sometimes be difficult with low-bandwidth environments, leading to issues with reliability and video quality. Butterill compared it with other solutions the organization tried: “Previously we used a consumer video conferencing solution, but it was basically an unstable bandwidth hog. We also didn’t like that everyone needed to have a profile. This is problematic for privacy reasons.”

Solution

There are many reasons why Virtual Photo Walks chose Zoom as its video conferencing solution of choice.

First, “the fact that Zoom is HIPAA compliant is crucial,” Butterill said. And with reliable performance in low-bandwidth environments, Virtual Photo Walks can stream its events from almost anywhere. “Ever since we started using Zoom and the 4G LTE Jet Pack and phones provided by Verizon, our events have been crystal clear, and it has been clear sailing,” Butterill said. “It’s easy, it works in low-bandwidth environments, and it is secure and private.”

Privacy is crucial to Virtual Photo Walks. The organization sometimes helps minors participate (and they must always have a caregiver or parent with them). And out of respect

for the privacy of participants, Virtual Photo Walks always make use of the Zoom security settings, such as locking the meeting, creating aliases for people’s names, password-protecting meetings, and hosting invite-only meetings. Butterill also vets every community member personally. Members appreciate that if they are having a rough day, they don’t have to turn their camera on; they can just sit back and enjoy the experience.

Result

Virtual Photo Walks has enhanced its services through partnerships. For example, it partnered with the Sam Sullivan Disability Foundation to video-enable the Trail Rider, a rugged wheelchair that allows the disabled participant to experience remote wilderness locations with volunteer assistance. Virtual Photo Walks will add a camera to these Trail Riders so the disabled rider can share their experience virtually with other participants.

VPW also partnered with Resolution Care to extend services and is branching into care facilities for seniors in the U.S. and Canada. The group also is currently working on getting its program into several large hospitals.

One of their more memorable events was at the Shriners Hospital Honolulu, streaming from Volcano National Park. The guides took a walk on to the floor of the volcano with special permission to enter restricted areas of the park.

[\(View the experience yourself.\)](#)

Learn more and [donate to support Virtual Photo Walks’ programs.](#)

Zoom helps businesses and organizations bring their teams together in a frictionless cloud environment to get more done. Our easy, reliable, video-first unified communications platform for video, voice, content sharing, and chat runs across mobile devices, desktops, telephones, and room systems. Founded in 2011, Zoom is a publicly traded company on Nasdaq (ticker: ZM) and headquartered in San Jose, California.

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