**How Waymo’s autonomous cars are aiding San Francisco’s disabled community, changing lives**

SAN FRANCISCO — Sharon Giovinazzo and her 6-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever always ride together in cars, often with no driver controlling the vehicle. Giovinazzo is a frequent user of [Waymo](https://waymo.com/), the popular autonomous car company in the San Francisco area, which became public in the City by the Bay in 2022 and has become something that Giovinazzo “couldn’t imagine life without.”

After all, she hears all of the excuses for why she and her dog, Pilot, can’t ride in a driver’s car when she’s using rideshare applications outside of San Francisco.

Some drivers say they pray in the backseat where her dog will be, so they don't want his hair on their seat. Others say they are deathly allergic to dogs. She’s been left out in the rain awaiting a ride numerous times and often needs to request several rides because of the issues that always come up due to her furry friend.

But he’s more than a travel companion; he’s Giovinazzo’s guide dog, appropriately named Pilot for being “the best wingman ever.” And because of Waymo, Giovinazzo and other disabled San Francisco residents are able to avoid potential mistreatment from drivers and feel secure inside the driverless cars.

“The technology is amazing,” Giovinazzo said. “I can’t imagine the brain power that went into all of this, because it’s absolutely, positively amazing.”

Giovinazzo, the Chief Executive Officer and President of [LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired](https://lighthouse-sf.org/) in San Francisco, has been blind for 24 years because of multiple sclerosis. She went from having 20/20 vision to “nothing/nothing” vision, as she calls it, in the matter of seven months. Without knowing a blind person, she thought her life was over.

But after advocating for and helping those who are visually impaired for years, [she joined the nonprofit organization in October 2022](https://lighthouse-sf.org/2022/09/27/lighthouse-welcomes-new-chief-executive-officer-sharon-giovinazzo/). LightHouse had already partnered with Waymo but hadn’t produced anything from their collaboration yet. She saw an opportunity and seized it with the help of Waymo, who wanted to have forthright conversations about what LightHouse needed and how to make it happen. Cruise and Zoox, other autonomous vehicle companies, had been working with LightHouse, but Waymo was different.

“Waymo brought everybody to the table,” Giovinazzo said. “They brought people who were blind; they brought people who had all types of disabilities.”

After creating an account on the Waymo One app, a user can enter an invite code to access the app — or join the waitlist if they weren’t given a code — and select where they would like to be dropped off before paying for the ride. From there, a fully electric Jaguar I-PACE will head to the user’s location and park in a nearby area before anywhere from one to four passengers entering the vehicle can hit the “start ride” button to begin heading toward their destination.

For Giovinazzo, this means no “embarrassing” moments of standing around with Pilot waiting for a ride after one is cancelled.

The straightforwardness of how to start the vehicle once inside is significant for Esther Landau, the Senior Director of Advancement at [The Arc](https://www.thearcsf.org/), a San Francisco nonprofit that works with people who have [I/DD](https://www.cvhnc.org/understanding-intellectual-developmental-disability-idd/) — intellectual and developmental disabilities — with whom Waymo is partnered. Because the majority of those who have I/DD won’t experience operating a vehicle, Waymo gives them that experience, Landau said.

“The ability to actually get in a vehicle, push a button and start the car while you’re deciding when to go and you have control over it seems like a small thing, but for a lot of the folks that we serve, that’s a really big piece of personal freedom,” she said.

Like Giovinazzo, those with I/DD have been “exploited and abused,” Landau said, so nixing the possibility of that happening to someone in their community is a part of what made Waymo so appealing for The Arc. That, along with Waymo’s initial commitment to safety and accessibility, is why she reached out to start a partnership.

And the safety that Waymo promotes is evident, Giovinazzo said, as she prefers Waymo to other rideshare companies with drivers. She’s encountered drivers who have been working for 18 consecutive hours when picking her up, but with Waymo’s autonomous driving cars, there’s no potential for an overworked driver.

“It’s horrible to go from one of the autonomous vehicles into a person-driven vehicle, and you see how bad people driving really is,” Giovinazzo said.

This was once demonstrated when a distracted woman who was on her phone walked in front of a Waymo vehicle with Giovinazzo and a sighted person inside of it. When the Jaguar had a green light at the intersection of Market Street and Fourth Street, it began to move forward. But once the car censored the woman, it slammed on the breaks.

On Waymo’s website, [the company released research](https://waymo.com/blog/2023/12/waymo-significantly-outperforms-comparable-human-benchmarks-over-7-million/#:~:text=When%20considering%20all%20locations%20together,2.78%20for%20the%20human%20benchmark)) in December 2023 comparing crashes that involved any injury, ranging from minor to severe and fatal, between its cars and human crash rates in Phoenix, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The study concluded an 85% reduction, or 6.8 times lower crash rate involving any injury, in autonomous vehicles compared to human-driven vehicles.

Even with the increased safety, Waymo’s product isn’t perfect — both LightHouse and The Arc still want more accessibility for those who are in wheelchairs, for example. However, Landau said a company that is contracted with Waymo can respond to a user’s request for a wheelchair-accessible vehicle if noted on the app and will arrive at any destination with a van and a driver.

But Waymo's technology is a "game-changer" for those with disabilities in the San Francisco area, who oftentimes feel like they’re left behind in technological advances. Because of Waymo's willingness to foster collaboration with these people, they feel comfortable when inside an autonomous vehicle, and that's life-changing.

“Twenty-four years ago, when I lost my vision, even though I watched “The Jetsons” growing up, I couldn’t imagine the car just driving itself,” Giovinazzo said. “Now, 24 years later, I can’t imagine life without them."