

# ZOOM

autism through many lenses

WINTER 2015

## **The ART of Communication**

*"I'm Enough!"*

The Magic Mirror Project

Adolescence,  
Anger & Autism

**"I MARRIED A GEEK"**

Maripat Robison tells us what it's like being married to John

# WINTER 2015

The logo for Zoom Autism Magazine. It features the word "ZOOM" in a large, bold, black sans-serif font. The letter "O" is replaced by a stylized eye graphic consisting of a white circle in the center, surrounded by a grey ring, all set against a blue circular background. Below "ZOOM", the word "magazine" is written in a smaller, black, lowercase sans-serif font. The entire logo is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping a large blue vertical bar that runs down the left edge.

**ZOOM**  
magazine

*Cover Photo courtesy of Dr. David Rifken.*

*Several photos throughout the magazine courtesy of Pixabay*

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# CONTENTS

## *In Every Issue:*

From the Editor .....	4
Close Up .....	32
ZOOM In .....	8
Balance .....	36
Inbox Question .....	48
Spotlight on Success .....	58
Milestones .....	62

## *Features:*



## **COVER STORY: "I Married a Geek"** **Exclusive Interview with Maripat Robison.... 24**

The ART of Communication .....	13
Adolescence, Anger and Autism .....	41
A Not-So-Different Friendship .....	51
To Disclose or Not to Disclose .....	54

## *Special Artist Snapshots:*

Heidi Vormer- The World in Tiny Details .....	20
Meet D.J. Svoboda .....	46

# FROM THE EDITOR

**E**very morning after breakfast my son Jay goes to the computer to find out which famous people were born and what momentous events happened throughout history on that particular day. What started out as just random trivia has now become a family tradition—a precious part of my day that I look forward to every morning. Perhaps one of the reasons I enjoy these random bits of information is that they encourage Jay, and the rest of us too, to dig deeper. In our family, making a statement like “Hey, did you know 2015 is the year of the Sheep?” will lead to an all-out search as to which Chinese zodiac animal each of us is and what 2015 has in store for us. (*For the record: I am a Rooster, Jay is a Snake, my hubby is a Rat and Grace is a SHEEP!*)

Of course, finding out that Gracie girl’s sign was the same as the sign of the YEAR led to further investigation, which is how we discovered that the SHEEP is a symbol of Peace, Harmonious co-existence and Tranquility; according to the Chinese horoscope, that will be exactly the fundamental mood for 2015 for us all. It also happens to be the theme for this Winter issue of ZOOM and why we chose to concentrate on relationships. Wait. It gets better. The Sheep is also the symbol of the Arts, a secondary theme that this issue just sort of took on as it all came together. ART is a way to communicate and, as we all know, communication (in any form) is a way we tend to connect with one another. It is for this reason that we are so excited to highlight so many incredibly talented autistic artists in this issue. You are going to love Debra Muzikar’s feature piece on The Art of Communication; it kind of sums up all of this.

We have a fair share of articles on “harmonious co-existence” too! CarolAnn Edscorn tells us what it is like to be an autistic



*After hearing that 2015 was The Year of the Sheep, my Gracie girl made this “ewe”nique picture! I know that sheep pun was “Baaaaaaad!”*

We have a fair share of articles on “harmonious co-existence” too! CarolAnn Edscorn tells us what it is like to be an autistic



woman married to a neurotypical man for 30+ years and the mother of five children in her ZOOM IN essay. We are also excited to have Maripat and John Elder Robison on our COVER. While being married to one of the most famous “GEEKS” around may make maintaining a harmonious co-existence a bit more challenging, these two seem to know how to make it work. Maripat sat down with us for an exclusive interview that will have you laughing out loud while making you think at the same time! (*Yeah, she is that good!*)

Of course, while we all hope that 2015 will be a year of “peace,” the reality is that for many autistic individuals, especially our teens and young adults, it may be anything but. M. Ketler is back again this issue with another incredible feature, this time explaining why anger, adolescence and autism often go hand in hand. Parents, you need to read this article!

We have another great Q&A question in this issue that deals with how to find and sustain relationships, and the answers our experts shared are extremely helpful! Once again, parents, this one is a must read!

Speaking of questions, in our Balance section, we ask YOU a question: When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Before you answer, make sure to watch the “I’m Enough” video and read our interview with the Magic Mirror Project, creators of the all-woman rock band, The Mrs. It will change the way you view yourself!

There is so much to check out in this issue, so pour yourself a cup of coffee, a glass of wine, tea, water (you get the idea), and dig in! We think you are going to love what you find.

Happy New Year, Zoom readers, and Happy Year of the Sheep!

Until next issue,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sharon' in a cursive, flowing script.

Sharon Fuentes, Editorial Director/Founder  
zoomautism@gmail.com

# WHO'S WHO at ZOOM



**Editorial Director/Co-Publisher | Sharon Fuentes** brings her professional experience as an award-winning writer, special needs advocate and public speaker to her position as editorial director. Her feature articles, essays, humor pieces and interviews have appeared in numerous magazines, newspapers, websites and books, including *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *The Washington Post* and *Parenting.com*. She is also the co-author of the book, *The Don't Freak Out Guide to Parenting Kids with Asperger's*, which won the 2014 Expert's Choice Award for Best New Special Needs Parenting Book by About.com. Additionally, Sharon brings her first-hand knowledge of being the mother of a charismatic autistic son and a dynamic daughter who, while not autistic, does have a few of her own learning challenges. But most of all, Sharon will bring a straightforward, hopeful, conversational style of writing with a sense of humor to ZOOM simply because we all can use a good laugh!



**Business Affairs Director/Co-Publisher | Sharon Cummings** brings her strong business, human resource, writing and marketing skills background to ZOOM. She is also the CEO/President of SLC Inc., where she has received many accolades over the past 22 years, including Top Washington Woman by *Washington Woman Magazine*. Sharon serves on the Board of Directors for the Autism Society of Northern Virginia and is very active with the ARC of Northern Virginia, the National ARC and the National Autism Society. Sharon is the proud mother of an autistic adult son and a neurotypical daughter. Her love for and dedication to her son led her into public speaking and advocating for autism acceptance. Sharon, and her son Conner write on their popular Facebook page, Conquer For Conner. They are both working to change a poorly written parental support law for disabled and special needs adults age 18 and over. This bill, Conner's Law, is up for vote in 2015.

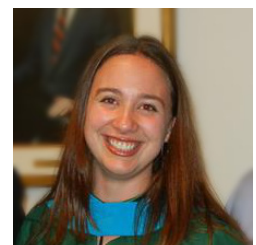


**Creative Director/Co-Publisher | Jodi Murphy** brings an artistic eye and a gift for storytelling to her position as the creative director for ZOOM. She is the founder of Geek Club Books, 501c3, autism storytellers through mobile apps and empowerment programs for awareness, acceptance and understanding. Her mission is to use the art of storytelling and technology to entertain and educate for the social good. The *Mighty League, Vol.1: The Terrible Taunting*, her first autism story app, which features the voice of Jodi's son (winner of 2014 Temple Grandin Award), is available on iTunes, Amazon and Google Play. *Mighty League, Vol. 2* is in the works. Jodi is a positive autism advocate, lifestyle journalist, marketing specialist and mother to an awesome autistic adult son and an equally awesome neurotypical daughter. She is also the innovative genius behind the videos on ZOOM's website and Facebook pages. Jodi invites you to join her at Geek Club Books.

**Copy Editor | Jennifer Gaidos** brings over 10 years of proofreading and editing to her position as copy editor of ZOOM. Jennifer was a high school English teacher but gave up the chalkboard and hall passes to stay home with her children. ZOOM is excited to have Jennifer crossing our t's and dotting our i's, and we thank her kiddos for allowing us to borrow their mommy from time to time.



**Website Designer/Webmaster | Elizabeth Roy MPA**, is thrilled to be a part of Zoom Autism! When she's not helping the ladies of Zoom with their website, she is the Development & Communications Associate at the Autism Society of Northern Virginia. She received her Master's in Public Administration from George Mason University. Elizabeth spends her spare time hiking, running, reading and trying to keep her cat and dog out of trouble.





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# ZOOM IN Married with Children AND with Asperger's CarolAnn Edscorn

He is finally trained! My husband of 32 years has not completed a sentence but once this past year. Like most neurotypical people, my husband, Christopher, has a tendency to want to finish others' sentences when there is a pause. That is not helpful for me.

I received my diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome in 1994, shortly after the birth of our fourth child. This was a wonderful event for me! (The diagnosis, I mean; although, the birth of my child was a wonderful event too!) Finally there was an explanation for lost jobs, lost friends, and lost opportunities. My husband, who is a special education teacher at the upper elementary level, spied an article taped to the classroom door of a colleague about Temple Grandin. He immediately recognized her pattern of thought and behaviors as similar to those of his wife. We went to a local specialist. Then I went to a regional expert. After the birth of our fifth child, I spent two years with a psychologist friend, sorting out my past and healing my wounded heart.



*CarolAnn and her husband of 32 years, Christopher*

I never wanted to get married or have children, and the fact that I have been married for 32 years and have 5 children amazes me. My eldest son is 28. He experienced what is now termed regressive autism just before his first birthday. I spent the next 18 months ignoring housework and playing with him on the floor, invading his space. He has since pursued an associate's degree in his special area of interest—cars. My daughter, at age 25, is much more typical in her behaviors. She is very social, outgoing, and intelligent. Our third child is 24 and has struggled with ADHD. Both



A close-up photograph of two hands clasped together in a supportive grip. The hand on the right is wearing a silver ring with three interlocking heart shapes on the ring finger. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the hands and a hint of red nail polish on the thumb.

*"Some of the relationship challenges,  
I have are due to word usage."*

2 and 3 attended community college part time. Our fourth child is now 20 and is our Asperger's child. It is difficult because even though I know so much about autism, he is very different from me, and my heart hurts as I watch him struggle with the social rules. Our youngest son is 16 now and 100% boy, running about, engaging in active play, chattering excitedly about whatever interests him at the moment.

My children, like my husband, are well-trained. I often disappear into the bathroom when I need a sensory break, a quiet withdrawal from the constant noise of boys and chatter of girls. They know to not approach me unless someone is close to dying. In the car we have a code. "Mamie's on overload" is the phrase for turning off the radio, turning down the air conditioner, and reducing interactions. When I am driving in unfamiliar places or on a busy street, I often state, "We are all on silence until we are out of traffic." I think that this might make them prone to entering a monastery, but they all understand that I have to completely focus on the numerous automobiles and dangerous drivers on the road. And most of all ... my children all know to not finish my sentences!

But still, I have moments. For example, last spring, I proffered my usual apology to my children for not bringing them up in a normal fashion. We were driving around town on errands, and I was feeling sad about something. My middle son smiled calmly and replied, "That's okay, Mamie. We prefer to be lamron." It didn't take me long to realize that "lamron" was normal—spelled backward. One positive result of living with a mother with sensory and

cognitive difficulties is that my children have a great sense of humor!

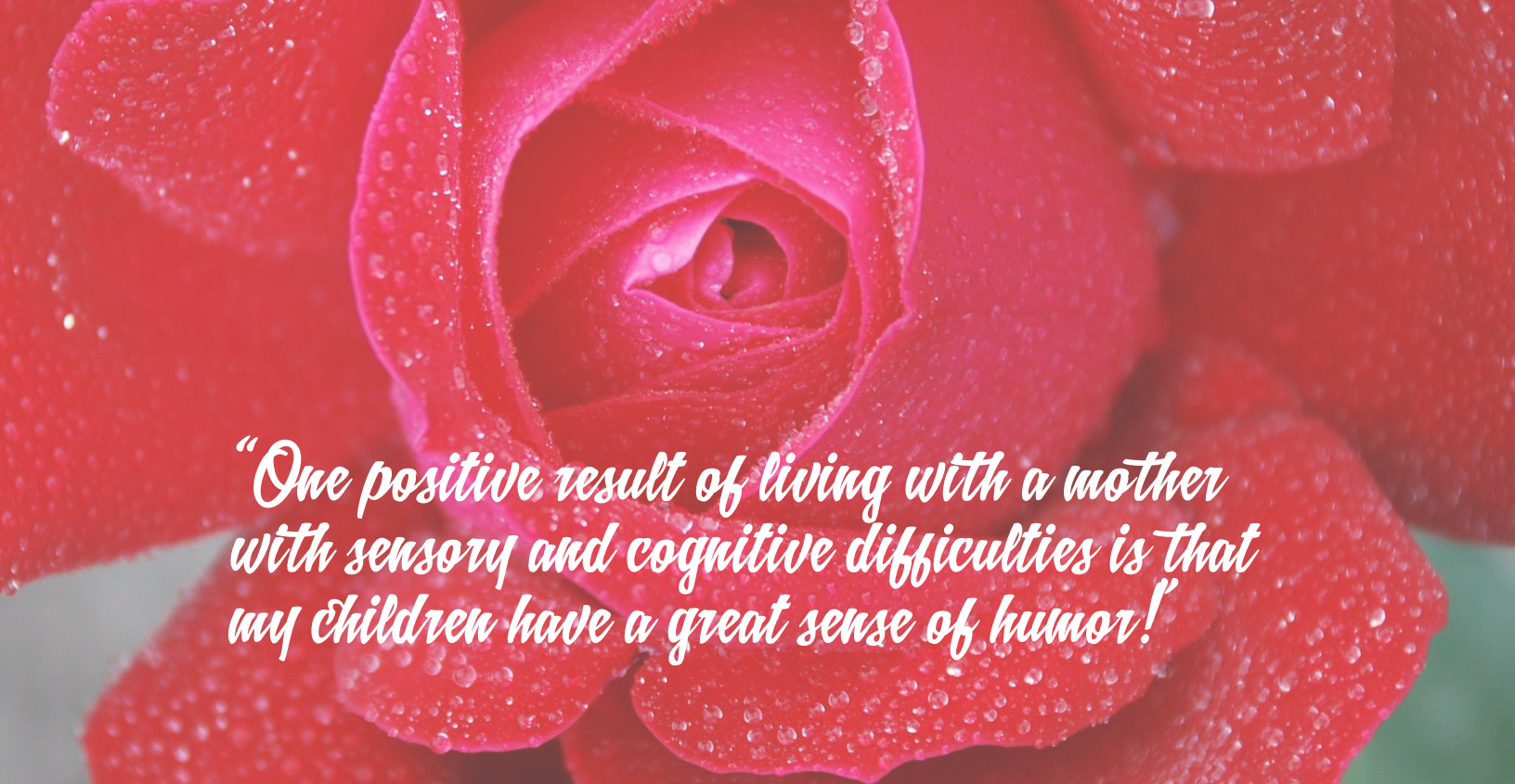
*"My children, like my husband, are well-trained."*

My husband has been so supportive, and he regularly illuminates my differences with

excellent metaphors. The most useful one is that he compares my mind to 30 Pentium II® processors. I am always running the permutations of a social circumstance: What do people intend? What does this person mean? What is the appropriate response? It explains that though it appears that I am distracted, I am actually running programs until I find the best one for a specific event or interaction.

Some of the relationship challenges I have are due to word usage. I used to read the dictionary, and I use words literally. I have gotten better with metaphors. Puns are not just "groaners" for me; they are outright incomprehensible! Jokes often receive the same response: "Um." This is mostly a problem for that certain





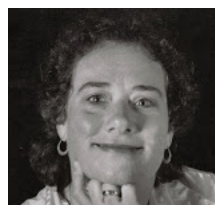
*“One positive result of living with a mother with sensory and cognitive difficulties is that my children have a great sense of humor!”*

age amongst young boys when they discover joke and riddle books. This means that I have had nearly a decade of practice in understanding humor! What’s invisible and smells like carrots? Bunny farts! Oh yes, little boy humor is amazing!

As for me, I have begun giving myself little gifts. I eat my food the way I want to—in orderly patterns, one color at a time, and often with a spoon as I am still dyslexic. I wear clothing in unusual combinations. I carry fidgets like smooth stones or Silly Putty® in my pockets, and I am uncon-

cerned about taking them out when they are needed. My greatest gift, though, is my life with my family. When I have a meltdown, they love me. When I wear weird clothing, they love me. When I cannot stand to be touched or hugged, they blow me kisses. When I do not get their jokes, they explain them and then actually repeat them so that I get to laugh along with them. They are my “anchors,” my examples of loving behavior that I can reflect back to others in my community. Because of them, after 54 years on planet Earth, I finally feel like it’s a safe place, like home.

*Do you have an informative story about what it is like to be YOU, an autistic person, that you would like to share? Send your 800 word or less first-person essay to [zoomautism@gmail.com](mailto:zoomautism@gmail.com) with “Zoom-IN” in the subject line for consideration.*



**CarolAnn Edscorn** has a BFA in performing arts and an MS in Public Policy Analysis with advanced graduate work in autism. She has been a keynote speaker and has created and implemented workshops for educators, paraprofessionals and parents. CarolAnn, who was diagnosed with autism in 1995, resides with her husband and youngest son, having launched four older children, two of whom are on the spectrum; and travels with Shakespeare, her service dog, who she trained—mostly.

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# THE ART OF AUTISM

*By Debra Muzikar*

## **Kevin's Story: Painting the World with Colors**

When my son Kevin was in Kindergarten, out of all the bright colors in the crayon box, he always picked the black one. Instead of holding the crayon between his forefinger and thumb like the other kids, he grasped the crayon tightly in his right fist and scribbled dark circles in the center of the paper. "A black spider?" I guessed. "No, a train," he said in his signature low and flat voice. "That's the smoke?" I asked, pointing to black swirls on the paper. "A train," he insisted. At that time, I assumed art was not his forte. Boy, was I wrong!

From the time Kevin was diagnosed with autism, a revolving door of therapists came and went, each offering a skill or a part of themselves that Kevin seemed to integrate into his own repertoire. A Frisbee football player taught Kevin how to hold and throw the plastic disc, a chess champion taught Kevin sophisticated chess moves, and there was Keith, who brought his dog Bella, whom we affectionately called Bella, The Autistic Dog, as he ran around in circles, oblivious to what others thought. While they all were helpful

and nice, it was Colin, the artist, who became a part of our extended family and forever changed Kevin's life.

"Draw me a picture," Kevin demanded upon learning that Colin was artistic. "You draw me a picture," Colin replied back. Kevin



wasn't pleased with Colin's response; however, he picked up a marker and drew something that resembled a dog, and this time it wasn't black.

The next week Colin brought watercolors, the week after that they painted with acrylics, the third week it was oils, and so on. Colin's tutelage included going to the library with Kevin in search of art books. They'd come home with books on Van Gogh, Kadinsky, Hopper, and Gauguin. Kevin would pour over the pictures as Colin talked to him about the artists. During this phase, Kevin created paintings, which we called Kevin

Gauguins, Kevin Van Goghs, and Kevin Kadinskys.

Colin used art to enhance Kevin's social communication. "What color comes from yellow and blue?" Colin would ask while dabbing each color on Kevin's palette. Kevin mixed them and replied, "Green." Kevin was learning the art of conversation with ART through practical and visual experiences, in a way that, I have come to find out, many autistics seem to learn.

Colin the art therapist may have started out showing us how to communicate with our boy better, but he taught us a great deal more. He showed us how to follow our child's lead and taught us that a child's obsessions can become an art form—LITERALLY! Kevin, from a young age, was obsessed with trains, so we encouraged him to put the trains on canvas. As with many things, you never know where creativity can lead. One of Kevin's train paintings ended up at Union Station in Washington D.C. for an art exhibit, and last year his painting "Bus or Cycle" travelled the world as part of a VSA art exhibit. We were even flown to Washington D.C. for the unveiling at the Smithsonian. (To see more of Kevin Hosseini's artwork, visit his webpage.)

*Previous page: Kevin Hosseini Smithsonian VSA Exhibit "Bus or Cycle" in Acrylic*

*This page: Kevin doing what he loves... painting*

*Next page: Grant Manier's "Puzzled Butterfly"*

Kevin's experience inspired me to find other autistic young people, and in so doing, I compiled the book *The Art of Autism: Shifting*





Grant m



*Perceptions.* I was introduced to so many talented artists, all of whom are just as compelling as the art they have created. Here are just a few:

*Obsessions can become art forms*

### **Grant's Story: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, CREATE**

Grant Manier had a compulsive habit of tearing paper. His mom, Julie, instead of trying to extinguish his habit, channeled Grant's compulsion into beautiful collages. Many of Grant's collages take months to complete. Grant incorporates thousands of pieces of paper, puzzle pieces, and recycled cardboard into his cool-ages. He is now referred to as an eco-artist and sells his creations for thousands of dollars. In his words, "I have autism, and I have daily challenges and struggles, but my disability has become my ABILITY to contribute to help changing the earth's environment and raise the awareness of special talents among those with different abilities."

*Grant Manier*



*Wil Kerner Cutout Kid Autistic Artist*



## Wil's Story: The Paper Cutting Picasso

Wil Kerner, autistic and mostly non-verbal, received a pair of scissors and some construction paper for his tenth birthday and his obsessive cut-outs quickly began to fill his grandma's home. Wil's grandma Susan noticed that his creations resembled characters that he was watching on TV. They were actually compositions! Wil and his grandma pasted his cut-out compositions onto paper and voila, an artist was created!

Now Wil, referred to as the "cutout kid," has art work, which sells for thousands of dollars, on display in galleries on both coasts. But even more than financial gain, art has helped Wil to connect with the outside world. It's given him confidence, which we all know is priceless!

## James' Story: Composer of the Canvas

James Frye, who is known as the "Futuristic Throwback" artist, says he can see the colors when he listens to music. Although James is 20, Wendy, his mom, only recently discovered that he has this capability. He creates original, bright, hand-sketched, electronic, music-related images that are then transferred to high-quality canvas, which he sells. James says that his art

allows him to move beyond his communication limitations, and the pieces he creates challenge those who view them to push the limits of their imagination!



James Frye



"My disability has become my ability."  
Grant Manier





Moving beyond  
communication  
limitations

Previous page: James Frye  
"Self Portrait"

This page: James Frye  
"Electro King"

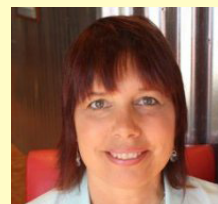


## INTRODUCE YOUR CHILD TO ART

Debra's shares her advice for parents who want to introduce their children to art:

- Try different mediums. Maybe your child won't enjoy using crayons but will like to make collages or cut-outs.
- Make art fun. Go on a scavenger hunt for materials in your own neighborhood. Incorporate recycled material into art
- Consider your child's interests. For example, if your child likes trains, have him paint trains or train stations or photograph trains.
- Turn on music. Have your child paint what he hears.

**Debra Muzikar** is co-founder of The Art of Autism collaborative, which showcases the gifts of autism. She has compiled two books on art and autism: *The Art of Autism: Shattering Myths* and the *Art of Autism: Shifting Perceptions*. She blogs at The Art of Autism and writes regularly about creativity and the human spirit. Debra posts art of those on the spectrum on The Art of Autism Facebook page.





# ARTIST SNAPSHOT

The World in Tiny Details

By Heidi Vormer



**M**y name is Heidi Vormer, and my artist name is *Remrov*, my last name spelled backwards. I was diagnosed with classic autism when I was 21 years old. This is quite late because my family and I—and practically everybody who met me—felt that there was something different about me. I struggled with every aspect of my life—socializing, making friends, language, communicating, school work—and I just didn’t understand why. My whole world was inside my own mind. I didn’t know how to communicate or how to interact with others. I didn’t know how to play games, how to behave or what to say. I didn’t understand anything of the whole world around me. When I finally received the autism diagnosis, it was a huge relief for me. Now I finally knew what was going on with me. Many puzzle pieces fell into place.

My one constant during all these years of not knowing was my love of drawing. Since I was very little, I have always loved to make drawings. I made drawings of patterns and road maps and fractals. Drawing helped me to stay calm and to relax. The details of the patterns and the fractals were always the same. They kept repeating over and over. Drawing them helped me to keep my mind organized. The whole world has always been an extremely chaotic place for me since there are so many tiny





"In a world of too much stimuli, when I am working on a drawing, I only have to focus on one thing— the details of my drawing."



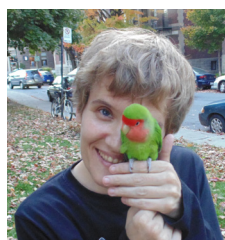


details that you have to focus on at once. And all these details of information come in at once, equally loud, and they all compete for first place. Even now I never know what to focus on and which details are important to me and which are not. I never see the global picture; I only see the details. And the details are never consistent; they always change.

When someone talks to me in a chaotic place, for example, there are too many other forms of information that all come in just as loud. Their words are just one percent of the information, and very often, I just don't even notice that they are talking to me. Even into my twenties, people often got angry at me, or they thought I was deaf because I didn't respond to them. But when I had a hearing test, it turned out that my hearing was extremely good. I can hear sounds and frequencies that other people can't even hear. The woman who administered the test was amazed by the result. In a world of too much stimuli, when I am working on a drawing, I only have to focus on one thing—the details of my drawing. This is one of the reasons why I love drawing so much.

Seeing the whole world in tiny little details can be exhausting and chaotic, but it also helps me with a lot of things. I see certain things that other people just don't see. I see tiny mistakes that

need to be fixed that everybody else overlooked. Some details also really fascinate me, details that other people don't see, and it makes me really appreciate certain beautiful things in this world, like sparkly lights and shiny objects. But it also really helps me with my drawings. When I'm working on a drawing of an elephant, for example, I don't try to draw an elephant. I look at the photograph I use as an inspiration, and I only see details. I draw exactly what I see, every tiny little detail that makes up the trunk, the skin, the ears, and then, all together, the elephant. People often ask me how I make such photorealistic drawings. I find it difficult to answer this question because it just comes so naturally to me. I simply draw the details I see. An elephant is no more difficult to draw than a rock. An elephant has more details, so it takes longer, but if you draw every tiny detail in the right order, exactly how you see it, there's no way to do it wrong. People also sometimes say that my drawings are even more detailed than the world. When I make a drawing of a tree, they say that there are even more details than in a real tree. But then I always say, "Not for me. This is how I see the tree. This is how I see the world." People can learn a lot about me and my autism by looking at my drawings. With my drawings, I can show them what the world looks like through my eyes. That's what I have to give to help other people see more clearly.



**Heidi Vormer/Remrov** is an artist with classic autism who specializes in hyper photorealistic pencil drawings. Because of her autism, she sees the whole world in tiny little details. Her drawings tend to be this way too, very precise and detailed. To see more of Heidi's work or to purchase a piece, visit her website.



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*Maripat and John wearing matching kilts, 2014*



# My Life with John Elder Robison

There are certain people in the autism community with whom everyone in the community is familiar. John Elder Robison, an autistic adult and advocate for people with neurological differences as well as the author of New York Times best seller books *Look Me in the Eye*, *Be Different*, and *Raising Cubby*, is one of those people!

However, as the old saying goes, behind every great man is an even greater woman, and that lovely lady is his wife, Maripat Robison. Maripat, you will see, is every bit as awe-inspiring as her spouse and is certainly deserving of her own limelight. She blogs about her life with John in a humorous way at *I Married a Geek*. It is obvious that humor plays a big part in John and Maripat's relationship too, for when we asked John what his favorite thing was about his charming bride, his response was, "I would have to say that the best thing about Maripat is that she is small enough to fit in the trunk of an English sports car. And thanks to years of yoga, she is flexible enough to bounce right out on arrival!"

After that response, we kicked John out of the room and got Maripat to put down her kettle corn long enough to answer a few questions about herself, being a mom/stepmom to children with different abilities, and, oh yeah, what it is

like being married to one of the world's most notable autistics.

**Zoom:** So in addition to being "a kettle corn loving gal married to John Elder Robison," how would you describe yourself in 10 words?

**Maripat:** Theophilic, Philalethist, Philomath, Ergophile, Caretaker, Advocate, Philotherian, Phytophilous, Nemophilist, Rockhound.

Needless to say, we had to ask Maripat to define a few of those words: Theophilic (one who loves God), Philalethist (lover of truth), Philomath (lover of learning), Ergophile (loves work), Phi-





**"WHEN I'M (JOHN'S EXPRESSION) 'YOGIFIED,' I TAKE THINGS IN STRIDE. IF I'M NOT TAKING CARE OF MYSELF, I'M NOT SO GREAT AT BEING MELLOW AND UNDERSTANDING."**

lotherian (lover of animals), Phytophilous (loves plants), Nemophilist (loves the woods), and Rockhound (one who collects rocks).

**Zoom:** Tell us how the love story began. How did you meet John, and was it love at first sight?

**Maripat:** John and I met when I called on his business for the business magazine I owned. I describe that first meeting on my blog *I Married a Geek* (Begin at the Beginning). It wasn't love at first sight because we were both married. John fascinated me because I love people who are "different." We were friends for a couple of decades

before circumstances had both of us single at the same time and John asked me out.

**Zoom:** Did you know about autism and Asperger's before John?

**Maripat:** No, but I knew about epilepsy, ADHD, and IEPs because two of my kids were neuro-diverse, so it was easy to comprehend the spectrum and what people might be going through.

**Zoom:** Blending a family is not easy. How did you two make it work?

**Maripat:** Early on, John talked about how he'd observed that the trouble in blended families starts when you don't treat the kids equally, and we strive to do that. It's so important to be generous and have an open heart. When all else fails, let your conscience be your guide, and just do the right thing.

**Zoom:** Tell us something that not everyone knows about John but that you think is kind of cool.

**Maripat:** He LOVES mowing the lawn, wields a mighty chainsaw, and uses our big tractor to plow the snow off our street (and some neighbors' driveways) in winter. He does that because he's geeked out with the machines and is also a really nice guy.

Two years ago we had a freak blizzard on Halloween. Because the trees were still leafed out, many came down, blocking a linking road that the whole town uses. John and Julian (Maripat's son) suited up, went out for hours and cleared the road by themselves. What's more, when a man living on the street came out and offered John another chain saw to use, John didn't even yell at him. He just asked the guy, "Don't you



*Maripat, John and Margaret (John's mother)*





*John and Maripat in Texas, 2013*

know how to use it yourself?" I thought that was a pretty tame response considering the circumstances. The town was grateful to John and Julian because the storm was such a disaster that the road crew was overwhelmed and probably wouldn't have gotten to the street for days.

**Zoom:** What is a typical day like for you? Is it all book signings and autism conferences?

**Maripat:** When we aren't travelling, my alarm clock is John saying, "Feed Me?" I'm not a morning person (you know what that's a euphemism for), so sometimes I decline. But usually, I do get up and cook something for him before he leaves for work.

Then the deliciousness of being retired starts. I have breakfast on the deck and listen to the birds sing and watch them feed. It's quite the show. If the garden's in full swing, I walk through the woods to it and utilize all of my marketing skills to persuade the bad bugs to scam since every-

thing's organic. If they don't comply, I squish them. I'm a vegetarian, but I do squish bugs. Last year, becoming a Master Gardener showed me how little I know even though I've been growing vegetables for decades. I'm also building out the perennial beds around the house because I'm happiest when my fingers are in the dirt.

I hike for an hour with the dogs nearly every day, do yoga, meditate, work on the book (*Maripat is in the process of writing her story, a book we at Zoom cannot wait to read!*), sometimes also the blog, and generally run around stoking the appliances. We have two in college living back at home right now, so the housekeeping has picked right up.

All of this is pretty welcome after thirty-four years in publishing, advertising and broadcasting. The last dozen years were in TV sales management, which is the perfect job for executive burnout. I never, ever, miss that business.





*Maripat and John's shared family Thanksgiving 2013 (Lindsay, Julian, Jack, MP, Joe, and Mary, who was John's first wife and became Maripat's very good friend. Mary unfortunately passed away last March and is greatly missed by all.)*

**Zoom:** What have you learned the most about yourself, about autism, and about marriage over the years?

**Maripat:** That I have to take care of myself first or I'm no good for others. It's like the instructions you get for taking the oxygen on airplanes. "Put the mask on yourself first, and then help others." I always thought that was selfish until I realized that if I were dead, I wouldn't be able to help anyone. Everyone tells us this, but it's easy

to say and hard to do. I'm sure you can relate. I think almost every woman can relate to that with everything we have to juggle.

My first marriage lasted thirteen years, then I was a single parent for sixteen, and now John and I have been married for three. Surprisingly, sharing the decision-making isn't as hard as I thought it might be. Partly, that's because John is brilliant, so I trust his thinking. We both have high IQs, and where his intelligence is extra cogni-

tive, mine is more emotional, so we make a great team.

Sometimes those opposite strengths make communication hard; I've had to learn to be very specific when telling John about my feelings. His neurological wiring prohibits his ability to read my non-verbal messages. I can be frowning, and John will ask me if I'm "jolly wife-ish." I've had to work hard on adjusting my expectations around that, reminding myself that he can't read my expression and doesn't mean to be sexist. It's one of those quirky expressions he likes to use, and his quirks are part of why I love him.

I'm no cakewalk myself. I have ADHD and can be very impulsive and impatient. (My whole family is laughing because I said "can be.") Those characteristics are just as difficult for John as his autism is for me, maybe even more so because of his mind-blindness.

All of these issues bring me back to the question of balance. When I'm (John's expression) "Yogified," I take things in stride. If I'm not taking care of myself, I'm not so great at being mellow and understanding.

I think it's time to adjust 'Autism Awareness and Acceptance' to 'Autism Admiration' but still acknowledge the pain and difficulty for families dealing with severe disability. When your resources are stretched to an absolute breaking point, there are no positives.

Also on the spectrum are kids like Jacob Barnett, who at the age of thirteen co-authored a paper with a physics professor (Yogesh Joglekar) on an aspect of condensed matter theory. With disability can come great gifts, and society needs to acknowledge both.

We need more services now. The proportion of dollars spent on long-term research vs. the efficacy and implementation of new treatments is way out of whack. I think family support and therapy is in shockingly short supply. Moms, dads and

siblings on the frontlines are not even considered in most of the grants awarded. Okay, I'm exiting the soapbox.

**Zoom:** Do you have any advice for parents/step-parents of kids on the spectrum?

**Maripat:** From my experience of having a child diagnosed with epilepsy at an early age, I learned the hard way to not become my child's disability. By that, I mean having balance. When all of my energy was spent researching, advocating, and coping, there was no room left for recharging my battery.

The biggest mistake I made going down that road was forgetting that other members of my family needed my time, too. Pretty soon the whole family focus was on the epilepsy. I know now that that had to do with my mourning process. The loss was the idea that I would have a societal "ideal" child. The elements of helplessness over

**"JUST GET THROUGH THE DAY YOU ARE IN, DO YOUR BEST, AND FORGIVE YOURSELF AND OTHERS FOR BEING HUMAN AND MAKING MISTAKES."**

my kid's disability kicked me into high gear, and it became my mission. And who could say that was wrong? I was trying to be a great mom.

The truth is that until I went through the classic stages of denial, bargaining, anger, depression and acceptance, until I reached acceptance, I wasn't able to effectively proportion my energies to the whole family. Today, I'm proud that my kids think for themselves and don't strive to be "societal ideals. They are uniquely themselves.

But the single most important thing I can say to parents? Everything will be all right. It will all work out. Just get through the day you are in, do your best, and forgive yourself and others for being human and making mistakes.

**Zoom:** What about advice for being married to an autistic adult?





*Ozzy & Oigy, Maripat's 4-legged babies, 2014*

**Maripat:** Don't take things personally, laugh as much as possible, drop unrealistic expectations, focus on the positive and remember that it's neurological wiring, not a subversive plot. And when you do all these things, give me a call, because I always need to be reminded of them, too.

Okay, before we give you your kettle corn back, how about answering these just-for-fun questions:

**Zoom:** Coffee or tea?

**Maripat:** Yes, please.

**Zoom:** Dog or cat?

**Maripat:** Both.

**Zoom:** Cake or ice cream?

**Maripat:** Can I say cookies?

**Zoom:** Mountains or beach?

**Maripat:** Mountains.

**Zoom:** Movies or reading?

**Maripat:** Both, in copious amounts.

**Zoom:** And last but not least, if you could have any super power, what would it be and why?

**Maripat:** The super power of acceptance—to work hard toward solutions while relinquishing outcomes. That doesn't mean we don't need activism. There are unacceptable situations playing out all over, and we need to fight for the rights of those who can't fight for themselves.

It's paradoxical, but once I've done everything I can about something, and I surrender the outcome of that work, it opens up the space for other forces to come into play. People can't help if we don't create the space for them to do so. I've learned that every difficulty I endure can be turned into a positive by helping others face the same issues. From that principle comes all my peace, strength and purpose.

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# CLOSE UP

It's Time  
By Karen Wesley Weaver

**M**y heart has been heavy lately with a lot of tough decisions regarding my son. He is a 19-year-old young autistic man with a side order of depression and mood disorder. He is transitioning into adulthood, which I'm sure is a scary thing for him. However, he is driving me completely bonkers in the process.

I'm hearing this whisper lately, telling me, "It's time, time for him to go." The whisper has been screaming at me, or is that him screaming? No, it's the whisper, and it has been saying, "Release him to the world so that he can grow into the man that he needs to be. He will not do that as long as he is with you." He shows the promise of being a wonderful citizen of the world. He will be a man with challenges, and he will conquer them. He will need support to make this happen, but he doesn't need to be coddled and protected by his mother. I just don't think he will grow into a man until he takes some steps away from me.

The whispers have also been saying, "You can't keep living this way, Karen. You are giving away too much of yourself." And I have, too, as I can hardly make myself out in a mirror. My inner light is fading. The walls are closing in on me. This world that I have created is now suffocating me. I have spoiled them all. I too have been spoiled. I have been given the gift of being a mother full-time for my boys. However, in giving everyone so much of my focus, I have almost been erased. I think of them before I feed myself. I think of them before I pee! Slowly, I am giving away a small piece of my soul.

The whispers are saying, "You have given to them out of love and protection, but it's time to let them fly. It's time for you to start flapping your own wings and start living instead of just existing."

I flipped on the TV the other day to find one of my favorite authors being interviewed. There sat two of my girlfriends: Liz (as in Elizabeth Gilbert of *Eat Pray Love*) and Oprah (as in Oprah). It felt like they both were speaking directly to me.

"If you stay on this path, you may literally die or die in pieces," Liz Gilbert told Oprah. I've been feeling like I am dying a slow death. This life that I'm living is a part of my path, but it is NOT my path in total. I am called to do more.



“THIS LIFE THAT I’M LIVING IS  
A PART OF MY PATH, BUT IT IS  
NOT MY PATH IN TOTAL.”







## "IT'S TIME FOR MY SON TO MOVE TO THE NEXT STEP OF HIS LIFE."

"The good whispers scare you. They open you up. Bad whispers shut you down. You can't listen to them," Liz Gilbert says almost as if she is speaking directly to me. My good whispers say, "It's time for my son to move to the next step of his life." The unknown variables of that scare the crap out of me. The good whispers say, "You are supposed to write a larger piece of work that will reach farther and help more people." The bad whispers say, "You do not have time to write today. You can never finish a long-term project. You have too much on your plate."

"Obstacles help you gain what you need for the battle," Liz's voice says, bouncing off the screen and into my soul. The difficulties that I face now are what are making me stronger. My destiny is to encourage others through my writing and to tell them that they can get through these obstacles and make it to the other side. It doesn't really matter what channel that writing comes in on right now. The point is that it touches someone.

"Any voice that you hear that attacks you in any way ... is not your highest self." This, this was one of my favorite quotes spoken by Liz that day. The voice in my head says to me, "You're not smart enough. Your grammar is horrible. You can't focus. No one you know has ever done this. What makes you think you can?" This voice really needs to shut up!

As much as I'd love to run off to Italy, France or Bali and write a novel about my experiences the way Elizabeth did, my reality is that right now I am a mother, a wife, a caregiver. So for now, I write a blog and share what I'm going through each and every day with my boys—the good, the bad, the ugly and often the hilarious. I share it all! I share with the hope that someone's life is touched, that I make someone laugh, that I help them realize that they are not crying alone.

I am also called to write a larger piece of work.



Perhaps that hasn't happened yet because I'm still walking the path of raising these boys. Perhaps I haven't learned all of the lessons that I need to share. My journey with them is not complete, and it does require a lot of focus.

Just like I tell my son he needs a plan—a plan to move out, be on his own—I too need a plan. It's time for me to set up my “coffee can plan” and put something away in it every day towards my own goals. I will write something every day. What I'm living and what I'm doing right now is a part of my spiritual journey.

And I am learning to cut myself a break, give myself a little grace and stop blaming every issue that my boys have on myself. Just like I am trying to show my son that he is ready, that it is time, I too am learning that I am ready and that it is time for me to conquer the world! Now, if I could only get Oprah and Liz to come live with me to remind me and keep it going.

**“IT'S TIME FOR ME TO SET UP MY 'COFFEE CAN PLAN' AND PUT SOMETHING AWAY IN IT EVERY DAY TOWARDS MY OWN GOALS.”**



**Karen Wesley Weaver** is a writer, autism advocate, professional wine drinker and grocery shopper. She blogs about her life raising two challenging, unique teen boys at *Confessions of An Asperger's Mom* and runs a Facebook community page by the same name.

*Do you have an inspirational story to share about your journey as an autism parent? Send your 800 words or less first-person essay to [zoomautism@gmail.com](mailto:zoomautism@gmail.com) with “Close Up” in the subject line for consideration.*





# BALANCE



## *"I'm Enough!" the Magic Mirror Project from the all-woman band The Mrs.*

*From the Editor: A couple of months ago, Sharon C. called me and asked if I had seen this video about a magic mirror that was going viral. "You have to see it. But make sure you have tissues! I think this would be perfect for ZOOM!" she told me excitedly. Of course, I took the bait because, well, how could you not with an introduction like that?*

*I knew the video would be moving, but I certainly was not prepared to be affected in the way I was. Like so many other women out there, I too am my own worst critic. I am not even talking about the physical things about myself that I could easily critique when I look at the person who stares back at me in the mirror. I'm talking about every day doubts that slip in when I question how I am doing as a mom, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a friend. So I thought to myself, if I needed this reminder, "Hey, I'm enough!" then maybe you all did too!*

*We started Zoom and created this Balance section as that reminder! We want ZOOM to answer your questions, entertain you and give you a sense of hope. When you finish each issue of ZOOM, we want you to feel that you are heard, to know you are not alone, and most of all to believe THAT YOU ARE MORE THAN ENOUGH!*

*After watching the video about 18 times and going through an entire box of Kleenex, I decided to reach out to its creators, The Mrs.*

The Mrs. is an all-female rock band from Austin, Texas comprised of drummer Andra Liemandt, lead vocalists/guitarists Mandy Prater and Jennifer Zavaleta, vocalist/keyboardist Larissa Ness, and bassist Jenny Mason. I was able to ask Andra a few questions about their song “Enough” and the incredible Magic Mirror project.

**Zoom:** What is the story behind the song “Enough”?

**Andra:** The lyrics to our song “Enough” came from the realization that, as women, we each experience challenging times when we feel we’re letting ourselves and/or those around us down. As mothers, wives, and friends with very busy lives, we tend to beat ourselves up when we look in the mirror about our perceived shortcomings. In realizing that other women share these same concerns and that they also speak to themselves with a critical inner voice, we wanted to make these negative thoughts, fears and insecurities STOP! So we set out on a mission to change the way women see themselves when they look in the mirror.

**Zoom:** The magic mirror and the “I’m Enough” movement speaks volumes to so many different people. What about this special message is so universal?

**Andra:** I think The Mrs.’ “I’m Enough” movement and our Magic Mirror message resonates with so many people because it helps them to see themselves the way others see them—their inner beauty, their positive attributes, their strengths, their goodness, and so much more. As women, we’re always doing so much for other people, and often times we tend to put our own needs and priorities aside. Because of this, the Magic Mirror represents a place for women to see their true reflections, the way others see them, and to realize that they are, indeed, ENOUGH just the way they are.

**Zoom:** If you were holding up the magic mirror to all the special needs parents out there who are constantly doubting themselves and wondering, “Could I do more? Am I enough?” what would the mirror say back to them?

[CLICK THE IMAGE TO WATCH THE VIDEO](#)





*The Magic Mirror represents a place for women to see their true reflections, the way others see them, and to realize that they are, indeed, ENOUGH just the way they are.*



*Photos Courtesy of TheMrs.com*

**Andra:** The mirror would definitely validate all of those parents who constantly face the daily challenges of taking care of their special needs children, showing them that they are absolutely ENOUGH! In fact, I know it's hard to realize in moments of self-doubt and other challenging circumstances that we are doing all we can, but I'm sure those children believe their parents are the best ever and will always be enough for them.

**Zoom:** And if we turned that magic mirror now toward all the autistic individuals who may also wonder the same question, "Am I enough?" what would the mirror say to them?

**Andra:** First, the mirror will ask the person in front of it a simple question: "How do you feel when you look in the mirror?" After that, each person's experience is unique. The mirror might

recognize their inner strength, their kindness, their loving qualities, or any number of other positive attributes unique to that person. Since each experience is personalized, we can't predict exactly what the mirror would say, but I can tell you that it is an incredibly positive and supportive experience that anybody on the ASD spectrum would cherish and walk away empowered, knowing that they are more than enough!

*"How do you feel when you look in the mirror?"*

**Zoom:** What is next for The Mrs. and the "I'm Enough" movement?

**Andra:** Following nearly 5 million viral views of our video in multiple languages, we've been receiving an overwhelming amount of requests for the Magic Mirror to visit cities all over the world from people who want their loved ones to share in this unique experience. So we've been bringing the Magic Mirror to malls across the country where people can experience it first-hand. To help us keep up with the mirror demands, we've created "The Mrs. Magic Mirror" app that allows people to send loving and supportive messages (which we call "Enoughies") to the people that mean the most to them. The Mrs. Magic Mirror app is free to download on Apple iTunes.

Furthermore, we have a debut EP in the works with original songs about motherhood, balancing personal relationships, careers, marriages and friendships, and other true-life experiences that real women can relate to. We're also getting calls from big corporations (such as Toyota and Shell Oil Company) to headline at their upcoming events. It's all happening so quickly, and we're all just enjoying every moment of it.

For additional information on The Mrs., including their tour schedule, or to download their Magic Mirror app, visit The Mrs. website, like The Mrs. on Facebook, and follow The Mrs. on Twitter.

*Do you have a Finding Balance tip? Send it to [zoomautism@gmail.com](mailto:zoomautism@gmail.com) with "Balance" in the subject line.*







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# ADOLESCENCE ANGER & AUTISM

What to do when your  
teen won't accept the  
diagnosis

By M. Ketler



**A**s children grow and develop, their social environments also see a growth in complexity. For those on the autism spectrum, these changes can be a source of both confusion and frustration. When social pragmatics are a mystery, it can be painful to see peers interacting and meshing around you.

I hear from a lot of parents who tell me that not only are their children struggling with depression due to these social barriers, but also, they are beginning to express anger towards their spectrum diagnosis. If a child has a strong desire to connect

with others but struggles with the mechanics of an interaction, he can quickly decide not only that he is different but also that those differences are “bad.”

So, what do you do when someone is struggling with their social world and feeling angry about their diagnosis? I know that many people react positively to a diagnosis and choose to focus on upbeat descriptions, but what is the best approach when the positive is not taking root? This is an issue I had to deal with in my own life, so I thought I would share five general points that I personally found to be helpful.

## Go Easy

If someone is feeling angry about their spectrum diagnosis, pressuring them to accept it can backfire. If they feel like their reaction is being ignored, they can be much more likely to double down on the rejection. That’s what happened in my case. Someone telling me about “acceptance” and the benefits of being on the spectrum just drove me in the opposite direction. In response to any argument “for,” I would develop an argument “against.” I’m not saying to completely avoid the topic. I’m just saying to be very cautious with how the topic is referenced and framed.

## Go Neutral

The advice to avoid pressuring is easier given than carried out. If someone is angry about the diagnosis, almost any references to the spectrum can make them feel like they are being pressured. So, how can you broach the topic without triggering the negativity? To the extent that you can, it’s helpful to avoid words/phrases that might be perceived as “positive” and replace them with alternate phrases that are more generic and neutral. For example, don’t say that differences are “unique” or “strengths,” just say that they are differences. They’re not bad; they’re not good; they’re just different.

For those averse to hearing positive assessments, it might be easier for them to accept more neutral phrasing. It’s a small step, but it can be a start-

**“When someone is reluctant to accept a spectrum diagnosis, it’s at least in part because they do not want to feel different.”**





**“Helping people come to terms with a spectrum diagnosis will sometimes mean helping them avoid distorted thinking about other people.”**

ing point for beginning to move away from the negativity. The more you can collaborate and not pull in different directions, the better. If you can mutually establish a more neutral set of reactions to the spectrum diagnosis, you can avoid lapsing into the kind of power struggle dynamic that often makes the goal of acceptance even harder to achieve.

### **Help Clarify**

This is stating the obvious, but when someone is reluctant to accept a spectrum diagnosis, it's at least in part because they do not want to feel different. They can see their peers making connections much more easily, and it can be very painful to feel that your differences have pushed those connections out of reach. (It's not true that these connections are out of reach; autistics can thrive and do extremely well when it comes to forging strong bonds with others, but I know at times it can be hard for some to believe that.)

The point is that low self-esteem can create the temptation to idealize the lives of others. Somehow, some way, others are doing things “right,” things you can't seem to replicate. Helping people come to terms with a spectrum diagnosis will sometimes mean helping them avoid distorted thinking about other people. The goal is to listen not only to how a person describes themselves but also to how they describe other people. If it sounds like they are idealizing others, they are likely self-loathing. To the extent that you can,

## **WHEN IT'S TIME TO GET**



Self-hatred, idealizing others, anger about a spectrum diagnosis: these can be signs of serious depression. Don't assume that it's a phase and that they'll “get through it.”

Find a local mental health professional (preferably one with spectrum experience) and get help if these reactions seem to be reaching an extreme. If you are lost as to where to start, a good place for more information online is the ADAA (Anxiety and Depression Association of America), which offers a directory of licensed mental health providers that specialize in anxiety disorders, depression and related disorders. They are professional members of ADAA who have chosen to be listed in this database. If you use the advanced search function, you can type in “Autism Spectrum” to find a professional with experience in your area. You can also search by city if you are located outside the U.S.





“Being patient and giving them as much time as they need is also a way to show respect. Nothing builds a stronger sense of trust than feeling respected.”



try to bring some clarity to these issues. Offer neutral, objective explanations for social behavior. Don't denigrate or belittle others—adding more negativity to the discussion can do more harm than good. But where possible, try to find measured, practical descriptions as a counter to self-defeating narratives.

## Help Prioritize

A commonly made mistake is to put too much emphasis on accepting the diagnosis and not enough on the underlying barriers to that acceptance. In a situation where there are bigger issues to focus on, make those a priority; the diagnosis stuff can come later. Let's say that someone is depressed because they feel ashamed of their differences. If they are diagnosed as being on the spectrum, simply accepting that label is unlikely to put a dent in the depression. Depression is complicated. It involves so many nuanced, interconnected issues that a simple diagnosis is not enough to address the way it operates. However, once those issues have been sorted through, it can be so much easier to feel more at peace about life on the spectrum.

## Give it Time

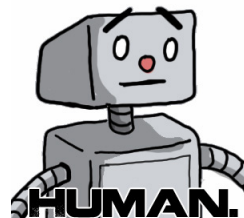
Absorbing a diagnosis like autism spectrum disorder can be overwhelming, especially during a time like adolescence, when so much of what we know about ourselves and our relationships is in flux. People need time to understand who they are. They need time to

sit with that understanding. I know it's painful to see someone you love struggle with these issues, but (within reason) it's important to give them the freedom and emotional space to just be so that they can sort through these shifting internal landscapes.

Being patient and giving them as much time as they need is also a way to show respect. Nothing builds a stronger sense of trust than feeling respected. They may not be willing to discuss the diagnosis now, but if they know that you respect what they are going through, that can leave the door open for discussion at a later time.

## Final Thoughts

I was able to work through anger about the diagnosis and depression, but it took time, and it required the help of someone who had been trained in these issues. It's important to note that everyone on the spectrum is different; the suggestions in this article are certainly not going to be applicable in all cases. The goal here is simply to offer ideas that can hopefully be part of a beneficial conversation between family members who are trying to navigate these issues. From personal experience, I know it can be a serious challenge. But I also know there is light at the end of the tunnel.



**M. Kelter** writes about life on the autism spectrum at his blog, *Invisible Strings*. You can visit his Twitter and Facebook page, where positive discussions with an active parent community are ongoing. He has been a guest contributor for Kate Winslet's Golden Hat Foundation blog and *The Thinking Person's Guide to Autism*.



# ARTIST SNAPSHOT

Meet D.J. Svoboda

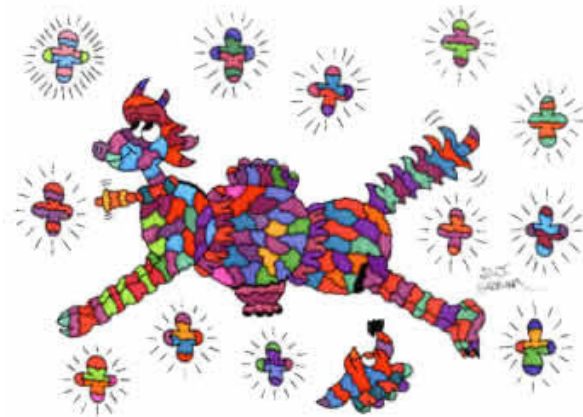
By Sharon Fuentes



While presenting at a recent special needs conference, I had the great pleasure of meeting D.J. Svoboda. The moment I heard his booming deep voice say, "Welcome to my Imagiville, where everyone is welcome and accepted for who they are," followed by "Have a great and

amazing and awesome day ... every day," I was smitten with this gentleman. Then I saw the huge smile behind the voice and his vibrant colorful drawings and immediately became a fan!

D.J.'s story is unfortunately not all that uncommon. Growing up, D.J., who was diagnosed with autism as well as a slew of other diagnoses at the age of 3, was teased, bullied and called names by his classmates who often didn't understand his challenges or differences. But D.J. took all those negative experiences and created Imagiville, a safe place in his imagination where everyone is treated kindly. "Each Imagifriend that I draw is different. They come in many sizes, colors, and designs. None of them are ever mean or cruel. They each have their own special job and purpose in Imagiville. Every Imagifriend knows that as long as they have a kind heart, it does not matter what they look like," D.J. says like a proud father speaking of his own children. From Mupper-zmo, a dragon-like creation who turns his head upside-down to see the world from a different point of view, to "The Shy Guy," who is so shy he wears a lampshade on his head, D.J.'s friends jump off the page, spreading a message of hope and inspiration and serve as a reminder that those with special needs are perfect just the way they are.



D.J.'s artwork has been featured in numerous publications and hangs in museums and on the walls of corporations, organizations and private homes. D.J. is the author and illustrator of three books that star his beloved Imagifriends. You can even commission D.J. to do a special mural or an Imaginame where he will create an Imagifriend out of the letters of your name. D.J. is also a dynamic motivational public speaker, traveling around the United States, sharing his artwork, his stories, his optimism and his anti-bullying message with all. And if all of that was not enough, D.J. dreams of bringing his Imagiville world to life one day via a TV show and Story app. We have no doubt that it will happen too! To learn more about D.J. Svoboda, the Imagifriends and Imagiville, go to [www.myimagiville.com](http://www.myimagiville.com).



WELCOME TO MY IMAGIVILLE, WHERE EVERYONE IS  
WELCOME AND ACCEPTED FOR WHO THEY ARE.





# INBOX QUESTION

*Editor's Note: In this issue, we are addressing a question that many parents and autistics seem to ask: How do I help my child (or myself) find, make and sustain relationships? As you will see, a huge theme among the answers our experts have given us is finding people with like interests, so we included a sidebar of a few ways to connect with other autistics. If you don't believe that having a relationship with another autistic individual is possible, or if you do not understand why it is so very important, please be sure you read the article by Chloe and Lydia that follows this Q&A section!*



This Issue's QUESTION:

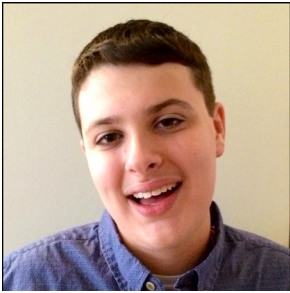
*How do I help my child (or myself) find, make and sustain relationships?*



Mostly, I think finding the right people has been the key to my relationships. Focus on those people who let you be you and understand what you need and what you are able to give instead of struggling to get

along with people who want you to be someone you're not.

**Jean "Stimey" Winegardner**



Help your child find traits in common with another person and then use those common traits as talking points. That's what I do!

**Jay Fuentes, 13**



For me, the easiest way to make friends has always been in the context of a shared interest. Identify some activities that your child really enjoys doing and then help them find ways to do those things

with other children their age. For example, join a Lego club, an afterschool science program, or a ballet class. There they'll meet kids who have similar interests, which can create a natural basis for social interaction within and outside of the group. I also think it's important to emphasize quality over quantity, so if a child is comfortable with just one or two good friends, don't push them to have more.

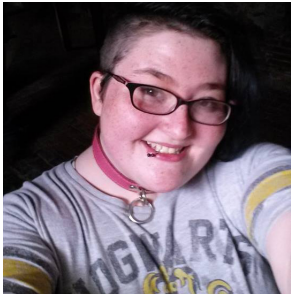
**Cynthia Kim**

## Why Not Try This?

Below are a few resources to help get you started. If you can't find a group for yourself or your child, think about starting one! You have nothing to lose and a bunch of possible friends to gain!

- **ASAN - Autistic Self Advocacy Network**—With chapters across the US and international affiliates, this organization's goal is to build a collective concept of self-advocacy while also addressing individual forms of self-advocacy and building a community of autistic adults in the local community. They also have a teen mentoring program and many social activities.
- **Autism Society of America**—The Autism Society has 107 affiliates nationwide, sponsoring local programs such as Safe and Sound, camps, respite care and social skills events. They also host a yearly conference, which is an excellent opportunity to meet new people and learn new things.
- **Autism MeetUp**—With 521 groups and over 45,000 members in 322 cities across 16 different countries, this is a great resource to find a possible support group in your local area.
- The Internet is also a place where you can find people who share your special interests. They might not live near you, but you can still exchange ideas and discuss your favorite topics virtually. One popular forum for people on the spectrum is **Wrong Planet**, and many others are out there.





There are so many myths about autism, including one that those on the spectrum will never be able to find and keep true love. This is simply not true. Besides you don't have to have autism to have a hard time finding

that "one special person." Finding someone who shares in your interest is the key, I think. For me it was a mutual love of Star Wars and comics that brought my fiancé and me together. I am not the kind of girl who flirts or makes the first move, but with him I did. I approached him, and I am so glad I did!

### Kansas Moskwik

(who will be marrying her "One Special Person" in May)



Making new friends is easier when we are not afraid. It can be sad and frightening when friendships don't last forever, and sometimes we need help processing that lesson. Sometimes I find a friend and then later

lose them because one of us moved or changed schools or jobs. I can feel anxious, bitter, and rejected when the person I loved wants to go make new friends. When our lives change, sometimes the people in our lives change too. There is grief at loss but also joy in happy memories. No one wants to lose friends, but remembering that "friends for a season" was real friendship with someone who really cared, helps us find courage to make new friendships as our lives change.

### Sparrow Rose Jones



I know about being pushed, teased and about not belonging. I also know that fear destroys opportunities for relationships. So what should we do? Presume competence in friendship! Autistics can have relationships. (NOTE: If

*you haven't already done so, read CarolAnn's Zoom In Essay about being married.*) Your child is able to make friends! That doesn't mean there WON'T BE challenges. Expressing insights can be impossible when language, sensory issues and thought connectivity travel varied neuro-pathways. When the expressive skills appear to be missing in our children, or ourselves, we get scared. The Parental Tiger (or Mama Bear) in us wants to fix and make it all better. Instead of trying to fix it, we need to learn to relax and to presume competence in friendships. By not projecting our own fears and anxiety, we automatically reduce it for our child! It is difficult to do. I know. I watched my sons as they struggled—and STILL struggle—with relationships! So what did I do? I used clips from films, read scenes from novels and biographies, and tried to model friendships for them. Visuals and video role modeling are great tools. Yet be careful what you wish for. One son was 14 and in despair. I arrived home from work one day to see a clutch of teens in my driveway with my son. I was thrilled. Until I got closer and realized they were all—girls! Next step: learning to let go!

### CarolAnn Edscorn



*Have a question you want to ask? Are you an autistic individual who wants to be an expert and offer advice? Email us at [zoomautism@gmail.com](mailto:zoomautism@gmail.com) with "Q&A" in the subject line.*

# A NOT-SO-DIFFERENT FRIENDSHIP

By Lydia Wayman  
and Chloe Rothschild





“We may socialize differently, but the important thing is that it works for us and that we’re very happy to be friends!”

### *How We Met*

**Chloe:** Lydia and I first met in July 2011 after I reached out to her via her blog, *Autistic Speaks*. I had been a reader of *Autistic Speaks* for a few years but did not comment much. Finally, a post Lydia wrote prompted me to comment on her blog, asking her to either email me or give an address to which I could email her. Then we began emailing each other, and our friendship took off from there! We then began chatting on Google, video chatting, became Facebook friends, started texting and finally met in person! Before I knew it, Lydia told me she was going to come to my hometown to be with me for my 21st birthday!

**Lydia:** I can still go back and see those early blog comments! Once we had chatted one evening, it was like we had been friends for years. We first met in person at a conference in July of 2013. I had backed out of advocacy for a while due to health issues, and I only went to the conference to meet her, but I became totally hooked on the presentations and amazing spectrum advocates that I dove back into writing and speaking and haven’t stopped since. I have Chloe to thank for that!

### *What We Have in Common and Enjoy Doing Together*

**Chloe:** Lydia and I have many things in common; we both enjoy arts and crafts, card making, Facebook, advocating for autism, writing, the color pink, Hello Kitty, and Disney to name a few. We don’t get to be together very often, but when we are, we like to hang out, talk, and enjoy each other’s company.

**Lydia:** Since Chloe hit all the important ones, I’ll mention that we also have sensory and communication challenges in common. I love when we are together because I never have to apologize for needing a break or even explain it. I think we get along well because we both love writing and advocating, but we both tend to seem younger than our actual ages and still enjoy typical kid stuff. It’s really nice to be able to share that quirky combination with someone who doesn’t just get it but joins in with me on both aspects.

### *Our Friendship is Not So Different from Neurotypical (NT) Friendships*

**Chloe:** Our friendship, in my opinion, really isn’t that different from NT friendships in some ways as nowadays even NT individuals have friends that they mainly talk to and stay in touch with via social media due to the fact that they may live long distances from each other. This is true of our friendship. One way our friendship may differ from NT friendships is that we knew we were going to be best friends before we even met. Another way our friendship may differ from NT friendships is that when we are together, just being there together is enough for us.

**Lydia:** I like that we can interact and communicate in whatever way feels natural in any given moment, whether it’s the way we talk about two totally different subjects at the same time (but we’re listening!) or being very clear about what we need. Talking online for so long (two years) before we met meant that we both had the chance to communicate in the way that works best for us and got to establish our friendship through typing. I think we even knew each other better when



we met, instead of meeting in person first, because typing meant more freedom to show who we were. We may socialize differently, but the important thing is that it works for us and that we're very happy to be friends!

### *What We Admire about Each Other*

**Chloe:** There are many things I admire about Lydia. Lydia is one of the strongest, most courageous people I know. She also has a heart of gold, always giving to others and willing to help others, even when she is going through her own struggles herself.

**Lydia:** Chloe exemplifies what we need every parent, professional, and spectrum person to know and then do—she sets goals that seem impossible, and then she comes up with a plan and makes them a reality. I've seen it time after time; there is really nothing that will stop her. When something bad happens, she never loses sight of the fact that it's just a blip on a much bigger path toward something great. I don't know many people of any age or neurology who do that so well.

### *What We Have Learned about Friendship from this Relationship*

**Chloe:** This relationship has taught me that sometimes you'll meet a friend at a time you are least expecting to meet a friend. It has also taught me that sometimes things happen for a reason. I was reading Lydia's blog for a reason; we were meant to be great friends! Our friendship has taught me so very much.

**Lydia:** My friendship with Chloe has taught me that there are people who will really stick by me through tough times. I have also met many other adults on the spectrum through Chloe, and so even beyond friendship, I've found the most incredible community, something I never had before, and it's completely changed my life. Since she treats everyone with respect and believes in their competence, she has made me realize that I can and should reach out and give them a chance because everyone can be a good friend.



**Lydia Wayman** is an autistic advocate, writer, and speaker as well as the Media Communications manager at Parents in Toto, an autism nonprofit. She has a B.S. in elementary education and an M.F.A. in English and creative writing. Follow her blog at *Autistic Speaks*, her column at Geek Club Books and her Facebook page.



**Chloe Rothschild** is a young adult with ASD who is on a mission to advocate and teach others about autism from her perspective. She is on the OCALI advisory board, a young leader for the Autistic Global Initiative, presenter, writer and advocate. Visit her website and her Facebook page.





## To Disclose or Not to Disclose your Diagnosis to Friends

### Story and Art By Haley Moss

In my twenty years as a person on the autism spectrum, I've learned that friendships and relationships outside of my family are one of the most fascinating concepts and one of the most complicated things out there. To begin with, humans are naturally social creatures. Since the dawn of time, pretty much, humans have found ways to communicate and cooperate with one another. However, this social component of our existence isn't exactly natural for me or anyone else on the autism spectrum, and the friends we do have are pretty special people.

I've often run into the "to disclose or not to disclose" conundrum when getting to meet people and when moving past the acquaintance level to being friends or more than friends. Feelings on whether or not someone should share a huge part of their identity vary. Some only talk about autism on a need-to-know basis while others wear it on their sleeve like a badge of honor.

With disclosing, I have figured out that people usually fall into one of three distinct camps:

1. Those who accept, understand and are willing to learn alongside me;
2. Those who accept and say nothing changed until it personally affects them; and
3. Those who are completely in the dark, so we go our separate ways.

Not knowing which of those three responses you will get is scary, but for me, choosing to disclose to possible friends, current friends, or partners is worth the risk. This is a personal choice, and I am not saying my choices will work for everyone. But I share with you how and why I have chosen to disclose in certain situations so that someone else out there who may be on the fence on whether or not to open up and/or how to may be helped.

### Haley = Autism

I used to only disclose to very close friends since I did not want to be judged any differently. Once upon a time, the only people who knew of my autism were my family, my best friend, and school administrators and teachers. Today, the

people who know are all of you reading this, my family, current and former friends, anyone who asks what kind of job I have or will want outside of college, anyone who has seen me give a talk or has seen my artwork, and nearly any friend I have or will make. I am in an unusual position with this disclosure question. In a sense, I live and breathe autism. I advocate, raise awareness, fundraise, and write about it often enough. The autism and greater disability community make me feel at home. “Haley” and “autism” are synonymous the minute you do a Google search on me. If I don’t say anything, people might assume I am ashamed of my autism or that I am trying to hide something.

### Disclosing Right Away

Sometimes, you may feel obligated to disclose right off the bat. I often fall into this category. I believe it is a great weed-out of sorts since those who can’t handle it seem to make it very clear before either party becomes emotionally invested in a friendship-to-be, and it saves a lot of time to find out earlier on rather than later at a graduation party when the noise is too much and you want to leave in order to avoid sensory overload. In that scenario, I can then kiss our friendship goodbye because someone didn’t know or understand why I behaved in a certain way.

Disclosing early also opens up a lot of windows for questions. A lot of people I have met over the years at various stages in our

friendships have been afraid to ask questions. If you disclose to friends or acquaintances/soon-to-be-friends/potential partners, I recommend you do it in a way that shows confidence and indicate whether or not you are open to questions. I’ve asked numerous times why the people who were electively in my tight social sphere, despite knowing I am autistic, did not ask questions until they absolutely had no choice (i.e., the time a friend and I left a rap concert because it was too much for me and he could not understand how/why it was overwhelming).

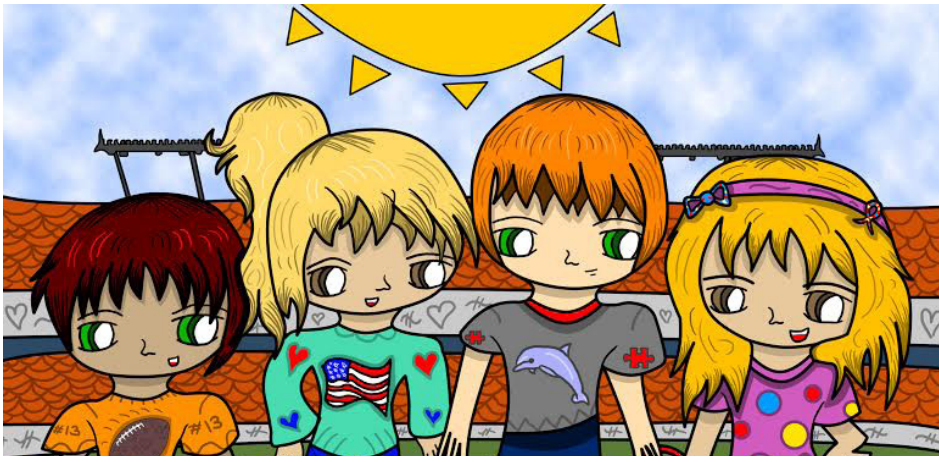
I tend to preface my disclosures nowadays with a footnote: “I encourage questions, except that I cannot speak for anyone but myself—as in, if your cousin or distant friend is autistic, I can’t explain their behaviors.” It is a healthy reminder that every person on the autism spectrum is a unique individual and that no two autistics are exactly the same.

### Waiting to Disclose Could Cause Even More Problems

Postponing disclosure could also brew a bit of confused trouble with friends. Instead of the understanding, patient pals you may have before disclosing and explaining autism, you may be met with a bit of frustration and anger. Questions and comments such as “Why didn’t you tell me?” or “You know you could trust me” could very well plague the initial important talk you could possibly share to-







## When to Disclose to a College or Employer

The decision to disclose to a possible employer or a university you want to attend is much different than disclosing to a friend. While every decision is personal, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- If you need accommodations at a college or university, you need to ask for them, which will require disclosing your diagnosis. The sooner this is set in motion (right after acceptance), the better. This means opening a dialog with the appropriate office on campus, usually called Disability Support Services (DSS). (Note: If you are asking for SAT testing accommodations, you will need to apply to the College Board for them ahead of time. Talk to your school counselor about the process.)
- Employers are forbidden by the ADA from asking about disabilities at an interview. You can disclose a disability to an employer at any time in the hiring or post-hiring process. If you need accommodations, it is wise to disclose by the time you accept an offer of employment. While you may wait until after you start a job to disclose a disability and though asking for a reasonable accommodation on the first day or later is within your rights, this will not foster a positive relationship between you and your employer.

*The above tips were adapted from the Pathfinders for Autism website.*

gether. These people became so focused on why you didn't tell them instead of what you did tell them or what it means now.

When in a friendship with someone on the spectrum, I think knowing helps color in the picture of why someone may behave a certain way, or maybe you won't be offended if a person with autism says something and doesn't realize you're upset. That kind of important information should be shared earlier rather than later.

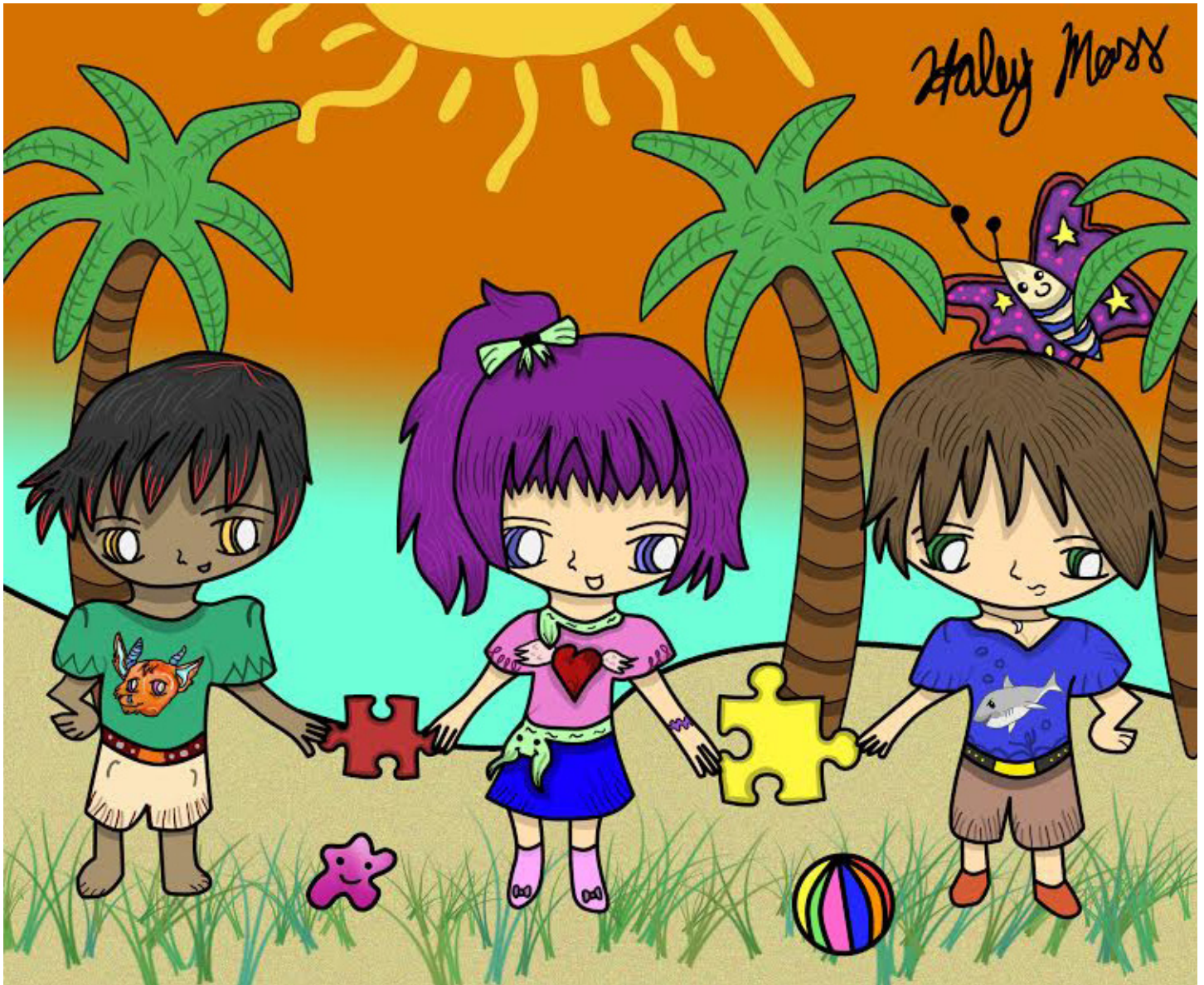
### A Personal Choice

I have found disclosing my diagnosis to potential and current friends to be a helpful, time-saving and honest practice. I have also perfected how I do it. Naturally, the way I disclose to friends may be different than how I would disclose to a partner or an employer. I tweak what and how I say to fit a situation best, if necessary.

Disclosing an autism diagnosis is a personal choice, and whatever decision you make in regard to it is yours and yours alone and should be respected.

*"Once upon a time, the only people who knew of my autism were my family, my best friend, school administrators and teachers. Today, the people who know are all of you reading this."*

“When in a friendship with someone on the spectrum, I think knowing helps color in the picture of why they may behave a certain way.”



**Haley Moss** is a 20-year old University of Florida senior who was diagnosed with High Functioning Autism at age three. She is an artist and the author of *Middle School: The Stuff Nobody Tells You About* and *A Freshman Survival Guide for College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: The Stuff Nobody Tells You About*.



# SPOTLIGHT on SUCCESS

## A SWEET Success Story: Cameron's Coffee and Chocolates

By Sharon Fuentes and Photos by Conner Cummings

It's hard to pinpoint just what makes Cameron's Coffee and Chocolates so inviting. It might be the vibrant burst of colors on the walls or maybe the enticing display case of goodies just begging to be tried. Perhaps it's the smell of freshly brewed lattes or the warm, friendly "Welcome to Cameron's!" greeting you receive as you walk through the front doors. Whatever it is, once you have been to this unique bakery, you will most definitely go back!

Jim and Ellen Graham wanted what most loving parents want—for their child to be happy! Their autistic daughter Cameron had a job at a local grocery store helping with the self-checkout lines, but when break time came, Cameron felt left out, alone. The Grahams knew that their daughter, who had aged out of the school system, needed more. She needed a sense of community, she needed to learn life skills, she needed to feel as if what she did mattered, and most of all, she needed a safe place in which to do it all. Cameron, who had graduated from a two-year catering

program at a transitioning training center, loved to bake, so the Grahams set out to see how they could turn her passion into a full-time job!

What began as a personal mission to offer Cameron meaningful employment quickly grew into a successful small business and non-profit focused on offering individuals with autism or intellectual disabilities an opportunity to master their own culinary skills, interact with the public and earn a paycheck while doing it!



On the day we visited the shop, while I sipped my vanilla mocha latte and nibbled on my pumpkin muffin with chocolate ganache, I could not help but smile as friendly employees approached our table to see how we were enjoying our treats. This is not just a job for these

individuals; it is being a part of something and taking pride in their product. And let me be the first to tell you that they have reason to be proud because that muffin was good! That is precisely why Cameron's is doing so well. While people may originally come to support a wonderful cause, they keep coming back because the chocolates and other products are made with the best ingredients and taste incredible! No need to feel guilty about eating these chocolates!

The Grahams want to encourage more businesses like Cameron's, where the employees are not just shadowing but actually working. "It is a lot of work, but when you are helping your child follow their passion, well, you don't mind spending the time and energy it takes to make it happen," says Ellen. She also offered the following advice to other parents, "Start small; no one says you have to be grand. Reach out to your community and don't be afraid to take a chance." For more information on Cameron's Coffee and Chocolates and Every 1 Can Work, the nonprofit started by the Grahams, visit their website.



*Cameron, who had graduated from a two-year catering program at a transitioning training center loved to bake, so the Grahams set out to see how they could turn her passion into a full-time job!*

# Cameron's Coffee & Chocolates

*"It is a lot of work, but when you are helping your child follow their passion, well, you don't mind spending the time and energy it takes to make it happen."*



*Do you have someone who would make a great feature in this section? Send your story idea to [zoomautism@gmail.com](mailto:zoomautism@gmail.com) with "Success" in the subject line.*



# SPOTLIGHT on SUCCESS

Special Day Cooking: A Life Skills Cookbook by Beverly Worth Palomba  
Special Day Publishing, San Francisco, 1st Edition (October 2013)

Review by: Catherine DeCenzo

**F**ood, clothing and shelter—all are necessities for living independently. Sounds pretty basic, right? But when it comes to the food part—cooking a meal or preparing a snack—those with special needs can be confronted with a dizzying array of challenges once they step foot in a kitchen. But if provided with simple, concise and easy-to-read instructions, learning to handle and prepare food can be a culinary coup that provides individuals with essential life skills and self-confidence.

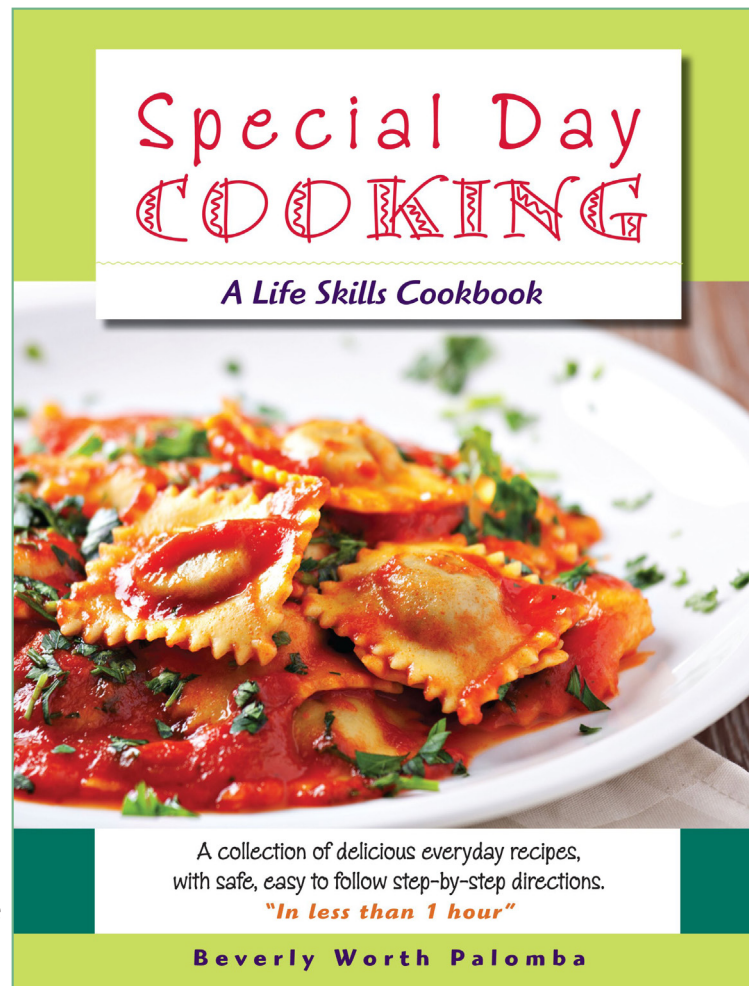
After developing a culinary arts class for her students, Palomba, a special education teacher, found that there was a lack of cookbooks easy enough for her students to read and follow. She filled the void by creating this book with easy-to-follow instructions and tips to help parents guide their children through the minefield known as the kitchen. She provides tips on safety, such as using a plastic knife, rubber backed cutting boards that don't slip, etc. She provides consistent, step-by-step prompts for the reader to first gather ingredients, second

gather equipment, and then cook. And on every page is a reminder to put ingredients away, wash and dry all dishes, and wipe the cooking area.

The pages are clean with a lot of white space and are color-coded to easily locate breakfast, lunch, and dinner recipes, with drinks (Cool Orange Julius, anyone?) snacks, soups, salads, and des-

serts (she had me at Cinnamon Raisin Bread Pudding!) bringing up the rear. Large typefaces and bolded first words in the instructions (Open, Pour, Measure, etc.) allow the content to flow and the reader to follow along with ease.

This delightful cookbook can be used all year round and includes holiday recipes such as



# Special Day

## COOKING

### *A Life Skills Cookbook*



*Cooking and sharing a meal provides positive affirmation and can result in confidence, independence and, ultimately, success not just in the kitchen!*

*Want to win a FREE copy of Special Day Cooking: A Life Skills Cookbook? We have a copy (a \$19.95 USD value) to give away to one of our ZOOM readers. To enter, just subscribe to our website. We will randomly draw one name on February 13th and announce the winner on our Facebook page on February 14th 2015. So go to [www.zoomautism.org](http://www.zoomautism.org) and subscribe now! Good Luck!*

St. Patty's Banana Cream Pudding and Holiday Blueberry Tarts. Sharing one's creations with family and friends boosts self-esteem, brings families closer and just plain feels good! Cooking and sharing a meal provides positive affirmation and can result in confidence, independence and, ultimately, success—in the kitchen and beyond!



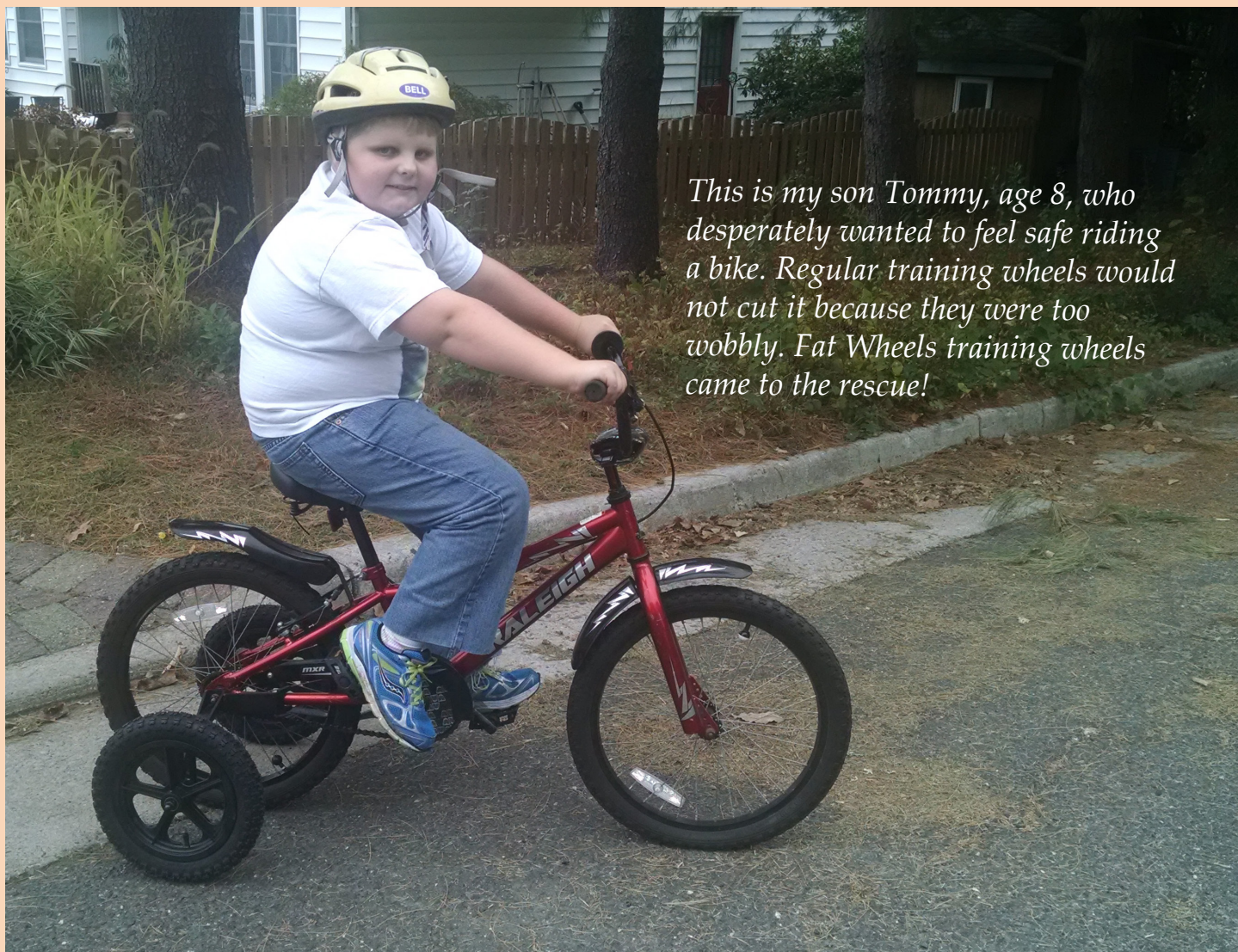
**Catherine DeCenzo** is an Independent Professional Writer & Copy Editor with a background in print and online magazine publishing/editing. Her passion is creating and designing, whether it's through her writing, artwork, photography or culinary endeavors. Contact her at [catherinedecenzo@gmail.com](mailto:catherinedecenzo@gmail.com).



# MILESTONES



*Adam's Launch to Independence! In October, he moved in with five other males who also have autism. He loves his home and his job!*



*This is my son Tommy, age 8, who desperately wanted to feel safe riding a bike. Regular training wheels would not cut it because they were too wobbly. Fat Wheels training wheels came to the rescue!*

*Have a milestone picture you want to share? Send it to [zoomautism@gmail.com](mailto:zoomautism@gmail.com) with "Milestone" in the subject line. Don't forget to include a caption!*

**NONE TO SMALL OR  
INSIGNIFICANT**



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# **ZOOM** **magazine**