



Actually Autistic Adults in the Real World A Day in Our Lives...

BY JENNY BRISTOL

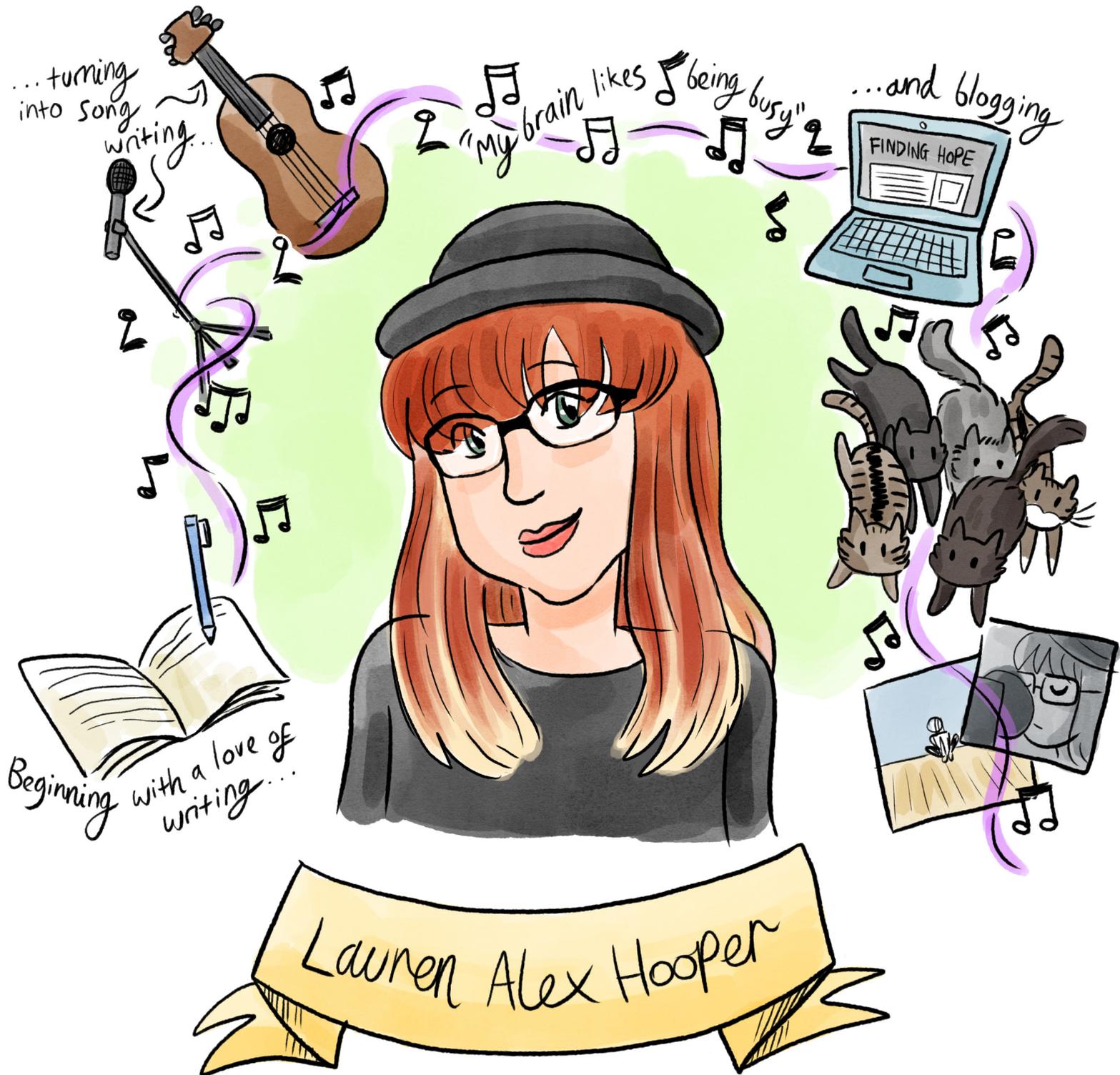
Illustrations by Rebecca Burgess

The autistic population is just as diverse as the non-autistic population.

There are plenty of autistic doctors and lawyers, business people and teachers. But there are also self-employed autistic people, such as writers and artists, caregivers and stay-at-home parents. And autistic people exist across all cultures and financial situations. Among this variety of folks, there are many who work hard to advocate for themselves and the world's autistic population.

We have collected together a group of autistic adults who have found success in their own way. All of them live life on their own terms, not anyone else's. While each one is an individual who has discovered their own niche, there are also many commonalities, especially in the advice they offer autistic kids and parents of autistic kids.

"If you have people who get you,
you can get through anything"



A Day in the Life of Lauren Alex Hooper, Singer, Songwriter, Musician, Writer

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Lauren Alex Hooper is an autistic musician living in the UK. She was diagnosed as autistic at age 20, just in time for adulthood but too late to be beneficial for her childhood. She was grateful to finally have some words to put to her experience, though, and she and her family fought hard to get there. Now she uses her unique perspective and the experiences she's had on this journey to be an autistic advocate and active community member.

Always loving music, Lauren came to be a musician in a round-about way, beginning as a writer and seeing where it took her. In the end, she combined two of her loves by being a singer/songwriter, as well as continuing to write about her experiences on her blog. She uses her struggles with mental health and her autistic perspective to help craft her songs, creating work that would speak to her even if she hadn't been the one to write it. Her first EP, *Honest*, is out now and available for [streaming on Spotify](#).

What does a typical work/school/regular day look like for you?

Every day is different for me but they usually consist of various combinations of the same things. I'm doing a Masters in Songwriting part time, so I have one day of classes a week and, as we're coming up to our next round of assessments, the other days usually involve writing songs either alone or with other songwriters (regardless of whether I'd be doing that assessment or not)—remotely at the moment, due to the pandemic—as well as researching for and writing the essay part. And I don't usually go a day without writing something for my blog (Finding Hope: www.finding-hope.co.uk). Plus we have a pride of cats (a family of five) so there are always cats around to cuddle or play with.

A lot of energy also goes into managing my health, mental and physical: a new thing in my life is the diagnosis of Hypermobility Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, so I've been building exercises from Occupational Therapy into my days and will hopefully get to start Hydrotherapy as well when it's safe. I'm not very good at just chilling out, especially when I'm by myself; I always like to be doing something and I can always find something to do, anything from researching my family history to organising my photo library. My brain likes being busy.

What hobbies or interests do you have in addition to music?

Music really is the big thing for me, not just writing it but listening to it and going to concerts. I really, really love it. But I also love writing for my blog and writing poetry. I love swimming and seeing my friends (these were obviously a lot easier before the pandemic). I'm also really passionate about autism advocacy and taking part in research studies, both for autism and for mental health issues.

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

I think this is a bit of a complicated question because there are so many layers to these traits and the different tasks we engage in. In some cases, it's more straightforward: I'm good with detail and creative in approaching different challenges; I'm strongly motivated by my emotions and need for honesty. But that can make life tricky sometimes. I can become deeply, deeply focussed on what I'm doing, to the point where I don't even register outside distractions, which can be both helpful and unhelpful, although usually I find it helpful. But I don't know how to turn off my brain so it's hard to take a break and recharge, which can create a lot of stress and anxiety. I'm also a huge perfectionist, which means my work tends to be high quality, but it can reach unhealthy levels: for example, I'm so determined to create the best work possible that I'll neglect myself if there's any chance that that extra time will help me produce better work. I also really struggle with my energy levels so, on certain days, I can't manage much before I'm too tired to function.

I also think that the fact that I was diagnosed so late (at twenty) factors in here. The late diagnosis and the long search for answers resulted in multiple mental health struggles, including anxiety and depression, both of which can make day to day life—even the simplest of tasks—just too much to handle.

So it really does help and hinder. I just try to manage what I can on any given day, being more productive on my better days and trying to rest and be kinder to myself on the harder days.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

I don't know if I've got it down well enough to say my accommodations allow me to be successful, but they do allow me to be functional. For the most part. I think the main things I do are try to manage my time and commitments so that I don't get caught in a cycle of racing around and then crashing. I also try to build in recovery time after events that I know will be big or emotional. I'm far from perfect and I definitely don't get it right all of the time (although these days, it's usually out of enthusiasm and wanting to do more than I'm physically capable of, rather than because I don't recognise my limits) but I'm trying and hopefully I'll get better at it over time.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

I don't think I've ever been actively discriminated against, but I do think that there's been a level of passive discrimination in the sense that, in the medical and educational professions for example, people have refused to listen and refused to take me seriously. My Mum and I had to fight every step of the way to get my diagnosis, to get support (something that's had long term consequences on my mental health). And then, when I finally convince people to listen to me, they often still expect me to behave the same way as a neurotypical person, seem surprised when I need support, and then ask me what support I need, rather than making it a conversation. Despite being the person struggling and in need of help, I'm still expected to captain the ship. It can be exhausting, distressing, and really isolating.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

With the presentations and experiences of autism being so varied and wide, it's difficult to give advice. But from my experience, having an understanding, dependable support system has been the most important part of my experience with autism. I wouldn't have gotten to where I am today without my family, my friends from school and university, my therapist, and so on. So I think that the most useful thing I can suggest is to try and find your people, whether that's family and friends, through work, from autism networks and groups (online and in person, when that becomes possible), through your special interests...

“Having people who accept you as you are—who push you when you need pushing, who hold you up when you need that instead, who will get excited with you, who will commiserate with you (and who you can do the same with, as gracefully or gracelessly as it may happen)—are so important.”

If you have people who get you, you can get through anything. It might be a big group or you might be able to count them on one hand but, in my experience, feeling understood is one of the most important feelings and it's worth searching the world over for.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the so-called “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

Again, with the presentations of autism being so varied, it's hard to give general advice because there are always going to be people who feel left out because it doesn't apply to them. So this is me speaking from my experience, which is obviously based on

my presentation of autism. Listen to autistic kids, in whatever way they communicate; believe them; be willing to advocate for them but help them learn how to advocate themselves (to a degree and at a pace they're comfortable with, of course). And when it comes to looking for advice—more specific to your individual experience, for example—I think the best experts are members of the autistic community, those with lived experience. There are so many books and blogs and social media accounts written and run by autistic individuals that will likely have more clear and applicable information. Although, it must be emphasised that this information will often be coming from anecdotal evidence rather than scientific study.

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

I don't think there was a specific piece of advice that helped me; I think it was more of a process. I think—and this took time—it was a combination of two things: of building a strong support system of friends and family; and finding and focussing on something I was good at. Those two things really helped me gain confidence in myself. But it was actually when I started learning more about autism in general and getting involved with autism research and charity work that I started to feel more confident around my identity as a person with autism. I can't say that that would be helpful for everyone, but it has been such a big deal for me.

How did you discover music as an outlet for your creativity?

I've been writing in various styles since I learned how to hold a pen; I thought I was going to be a novelist. But I was also singing and when I was sixteen, something clicked and I realised I could do both—together. I started to learn how to play guitar and started playing piano again, having had lessons when I was younger. And it probably only took five or six songs before I knew that it was what I wanted to do. It just felt so right. I never felt so in sync with myself and with the world as when I'm writing a song, a feeling I still get when I write. I knew I had a lot to learn but that was all I wanted to do. So I did.

What do you hope that other autistic people, especially, would gain from your songs?

A big part of why I started writing songs was because I couldn't find any music that I really resonated with or felt was representative of my life. So it started out as creating music that I would've wanted to hear, and that's something that I've always kept in the back of my mind as I've worked on my writing: if they weren't my songs and I heard them, would I feel connected to them? Seen and heard by them?

“And now that I've reached the point of releasing music, I hope that other people—people who maybe experience the world in a similar way to me or who have had similar experiences to me—get that from my songs. I hope they feel validated by them; I hope they feel less alone from hearing them.”

How does your mental health affect your lyrics and music?

How good or bad my mental health is (how anxious I am, for example) does affect my ability to write; for example, if my depression is really overwhelming, it's like the creative switch is just flipped and there's nothing there. So managing my mental health is really important in order to keep creating, which, in turn, is really important for my mental health; it's a cycle I have to be aware of and a cycle I have to protect fiercely. But this is my life and so I draw on the experiences I've had, many of them involving my struggle with my mental health, and turn them into songs. My debut single, “Invisible,” and my debut EP, *Honest*, both centre around some of these experiences.

How are people responding to the songs you've released so far?

The response has been really positive, which has been amazing. At this point, the *Honest* EP has just surpassed 60k streams on Spotify, approximately six months after I finished the release cycle. For a first release—and an independent one—I'm really proud of that.

People are listening to it! And with each track released, I got some really positive reviews, which was and is really encouraging. I'm currently releasing acoustic sessions of the songs on YouTube, which have been received really positively so far, which has been great because I was so nervous about them. And I'm just starting to work on the next project... I'm pretty sure I know what I want to do but I have so many ideas and that's such an exciting place to be.

What advice do you have for autistic people who want to pursue creative careers or hobbies?

In the case of a creative hobby, I would encourage you to pursue it without hesitation: there are so many ways to be creative and there is so much to be gained from engaging with your own unique form of creativity. In the case of a creative career, I think it's more complicated because, of course, you're building your livelihood on it and depending on your art can change a lot of things, including your relationship with whatever creative pursuit you work with. So it's an important decision that you have to think about carefully. But ultimately, I think, it has to feel right; you have to feel in your gut that it's where you're supposed to be. (And even then it doesn't mean you won't have doubts; I've made this "leap" into a creative career and I still sometimes wonder if I've made the right choice.)

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

I think it's really important that we continue to have conversations about girls and women with autism and how the presentation can often be very different to the conventional presentation, leading to many girls and women going undiagnosed or being diagnosed late in life. This can have a really serious impact on these individuals' lives, on their mental health, their emotional health, and so on. More understanding (actual understanding and not just vague awareness) about autism in general is vital, but especially in girls

and women as it's still so misunderstood.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- Find my music on [Spotify](#)
- Website: laurenalexhooper.com
- Blog: finding-hope.co.uk
- Instagram: [instagram.com/laurenalexhooper](https://www.instagram.com/laurenalexhooper)
- Twitter: twitter.com/laurenahooper
- Facebook: [facebook.com/LaurenAlexHooper](https://www.facebook.com/LaurenAlexHooper)

"Acceptance is the beginning and the end.
Everything gets easier with acceptance."



"With WALKING AUTISM,
I found my Passion"

"I love learning..."



"...But hated school"



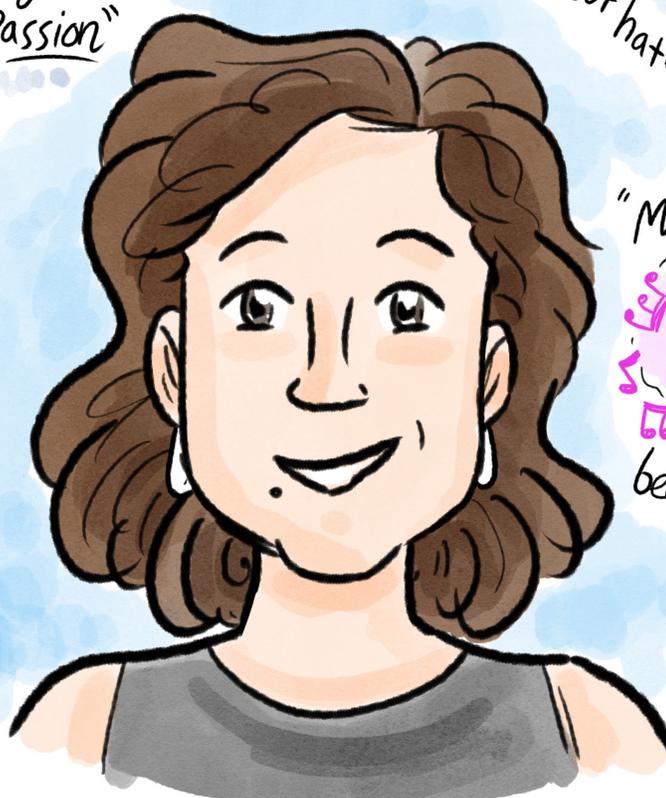
"Music has always



been my therapist"



Walking and raising awareness....



A Day in the Life of Abby Brooke, Autism Advocate, Long-Distance Walker

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Abby Brooke is an autistic woman living in Kenya who walks long distances, often hundreds or thousands of kilometers, to raise awareness and acceptance of autism. She also works hard to educate families on what it means to be autistic, all with her trusty backpack and pack camels (and sometimes assistants) in tow. Her long walking voyages have raised the visibility of her work, helping her share her passion for autism advocacy with countless communities, families, and individuals in Africa, and she's been interviewed by many press outlets over the years. She continues to plan new walks, including a 2021 trip in Kenya called Summit to Sea, where Abby will walk from a mountain to the ocean, giving informational workshops along the way.

Abby is passionate about her autism work and travel, including learning about other cultures, and is happy to be able to combine those in her life's work. Along with the rest of us, she has found that being autistic makes some parts of her work harder, and some parts easier. Also like many of us, she was bullied as a child, and continues to work through that trauma. This look into her life and vocation in Africa provides an important perspective that the rest of us can benefit from examining.

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you?

Of course with COVID, a "typical" day has been flipped upside down, but pre-COVID, as well as working on my Walking autism project, I devoted a lot of my time to caring for a young girl with Cerebral Palsy. With COVID, I've sadly had to stop my care for her. My laser focus now is on my Walking autism project, raising money, generating PR, follow-up on emails and interview requests. I am also an artist; I make mosaic art pieces.

But, as is common with self-employed entrepreneurs, I never really stop working on my Walking autism project and as such find myself working late at night answering questions from overseas where the workday is just starting.

When I'm out on the road, it looks very different. I have a more "regular" routine out there (but is anything ever regular on the trail?!). I'm up by 4:00 AM, break down my tent, and pack the camp. My two assistants and I try to unpack only what is necessary so break down is easy the next day—so it's the little leftover items, which includes the morning tea (coffee for me)! Pack up the camels, wave goodbye to our hosts, if we happen to have any, and set off. We get a few hours walking in before stopping for breakfast somewhere, which usually attracts a lot of attention, which then allows me to talk to people about the project. A few more hours walking (and stopping to chat with passersby), a light lunch, walk some more, and usually by 5/5:30 we've found our camp, unpacked the camels, let them graze while we set up camp & cook dinner, sometimes we'll have people come by the camp to chat, or to ask me questions, and by 8/9pm we're (camels included) done for the day! – Party Central out there!

The days we're having workshops, meeting media, and/or our rest days all look slightly different. But you get the idea.

I average 20 kilometers of walking per day out there.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

Outside of Walking autism and my love of camels, I have quite a few interests including reading (non-fiction/current affairs/reportage/journalism & history are my favorite genres), travel (both experiencing & reading about it), being creative, and of course my music. Music has always been my therapist!

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

My autistic ability to throw myself into my interests and hyper focus on things that interest me has helped me immensely!

I love learning, but hated school, because of the bullying I received. Compounding that, I was not taught in a way that I understood, so I was bad at school. But, because I loved learning, I'd teach myself certain things, and, because I could hyper focus on things and I was interested in them, I did learn. This is where I feel my autism helps.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

I have always been very hard on myself in general, always pushing myself to do “more”—to go beyond—and ultimately, in the long run, this has resulted in burn-out. Since learning about my autism, while I don't think I'll ever stop pushing myself, I can give myself a break!

Also being able to know when I need to take a 5-minute break is super important!

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

I have been bullied and ridiculed ever since I started school because of my autistic traits. Little things I would do, that seemed normal to me, yet I guess to everyone else weren't. I didn't know it then, but I learnt to mask early because of this; all I wanted to do was “fit in”—I always knew I was different but didn't understand why, and it upset me when others picked up on it and correspondingly picked on me.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

Probably the most important advice I'd give is to reach out; don't go it alone—it's hard!! Reach out, find other people, be they online or in person. Social media is wonderful for finding kindred spirits!

“Reach out, connect, and teach yourself everything you can! The more you understand, the kinder you'll be to yourself. I spent 2+ decades alone, never speaking about my autism to anyone, because I had no one. The deep dark hole of depression was unbearable. Don't do that!!”

Reach out, connect... Find your people, learn everything you can about autism and where/how you fit in, and things will be easier!

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids becoming their best selves?

Acceptance! Acceptance! Acceptance!

Acceptance is the beginning and the end! Everything gets easier with acceptance. Compassion and empathy must also be present.

Every child has certain things they excel at; look for these and encourage them in them, rather than putting pressure on them to do what they may find difficult. As time goes on, our world is becoming more open and we're making more space for all kinds of talents and strengths. We don't have to fit into society's box!

What advice from the so-called “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

I think with all experts, take from it what you will. Learn but don't base everything on what the experts say. Think. We are all unique... embrace and encourage that!

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

I don't know if I could pinpoint one particular piece of advice. The more I read, the more wisdom and advice I found and learnt. Each is as vital as the last. I'm still learning to be comfortable within myself. It's a journey, but the more I read, the more I learn.

How do you think your perspective as an autistic person gives you an advantage when traveling and encountering new people and cultures?

I have been very fortunate in my life for developing a love and fascination for different cultures since I was a child. Growing up in Kenya, which is very multicultural, I was exposed to a wide variety of different people and cultures. This combined with my autistic passion of reading and learning about the world has come together as a strength I feel in my adult life. Through my various travels to different places, I have been fortunate to experience a variety of experiences that are outside of my own upbringing, but because I have done what research and learning I can, it's easier for me to adapt to a situation.

This, and I usually travel very simply, alone with my backpack (nicknamed "toto yangu" which means "My Child" in Swahili). I keep my travels easy, so it's not too overwhelming. A few plans and places, but all the in-between, I just see where it takes me!

This is an interesting question though, as I have never really thought of it in-depth, I wonder what the differences would be in terms of autistic traveling vs. non-autistic travel... open to thoughts.

On the whole, though, I think a desire to see more of the world and a respect to wherever you go, the people and the culture is important in travel, whatever your perspective.

I have been long fascinated with North Africa & the Middle East, so when I can, these are both places I long to explore!

How has discovering the autistic community online been helpful to your mental health?

Immensely!

"For the first time in my life, I felt validated. I made sense. My entire life I always knew there was something different about me, but never quite understood why."

When I joined a small Facebook group for autistic women, it was absolutely life-changing in the best possible way. Interacting and communicating with these women, I was able to understand so much. I asked so many questions about anything and everything and god bless these women, they answered them. It was immense in every way for my mental health. I'm still in touch with a lot of these women and I'm thankful to each one.

In what ways have you had the opportunity to help disabled people in Africa?

From my experiences of growing up autistic here, the hardships I experienced, the lessons I had to learn for myself, and finally the understanding and accepting of myself, combined with the knowledge I acquired regarding disability in Kenya (and much of Africa), I wanted to do something to improve the situation. This is where the idea for my project Walking autism began in 2011, raising awareness, acceptance, and understanding of autism within Kenya and eventually Africa, by walking long distance with camels as baggage carriers. On these walks, I visit rural communities (who disproportionately lack access to autism education and resources) and I talk with them about autism.

Since Walking autism's inception, I have walked 1,000 km across the country, met and been able to help hundreds of people, given talks and workshops, and been interviewed on radio, TV, and various podcasts.

By sharing my story, I have had the amazing opportunity to share what I learnt and am learning in return. Something I've always believed in is, as adults, we have an obligation to do something for the young, do something to make the world better than you found it, be it big or small. With Walking autism, I found my passion.

This is also my journey; I am still on the path to unconditional acceptance. I won't lie and say it's easy—it isn't. Years of low self-esteem don't vanish overnight, but being on the journey is helping.

What were the most surprising parts of your long-distance walks? What were the most challenging?

The most surprising was seeing people further on up the road know who I was and what I was doing. Usually these are mothers with disabled children. Because my project has mainly catered to the more rural and impoverished areas of the country where awareness and understanding is still minimal, there isn't a lot of support, so when I'm able to help someone while on the road, this is both wonderful and surprising—surprising because I wonder how on earth they know about me (though honestly, I shouldn't be, as a woman walking two camels isn't exactly a regular sight)!

Wonderful because that's why I'm walking—helping others. Believe me, when it's raining and cold and both you and the camels are sliding in mud, I do question my own sanity! – So when the moments do come up; it makes it all worthwhile!

Most challenging are the days that seem to never end! If I haven't slept well, and would much rather be in bed than walking, that's a challenge! – As are the times when I get overwhelmed and “me time” is hard to come by!

What do you hope most that people take away from the talks that you give?

The main thing I hope people take away is that autism and disability are a valid part of the human existence. Acceptance, understanding, respect, and dignity are what we all need and deserve.

How is the planning going for your Summit to Sea project?

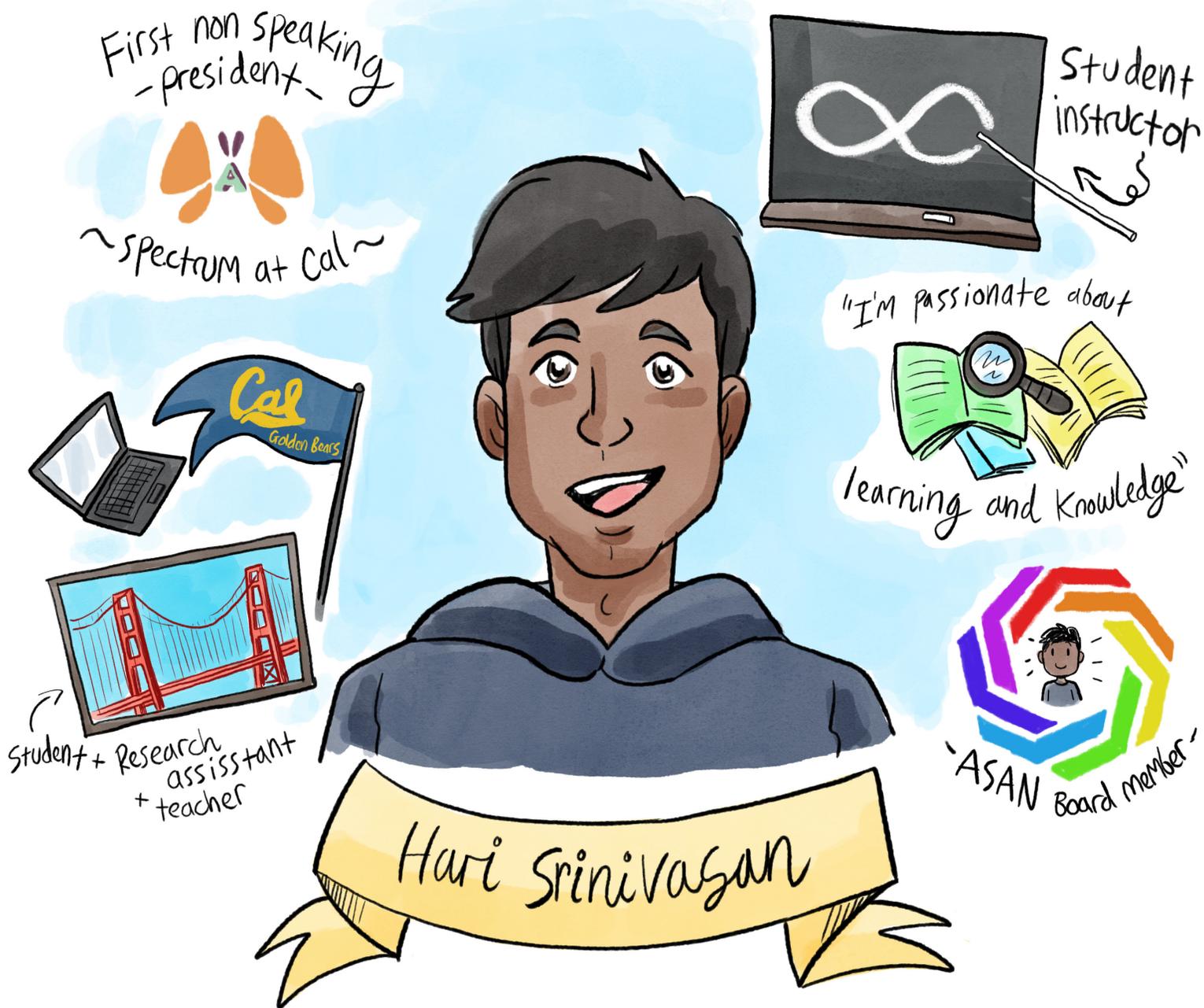
I am currently working on my next walk, which is a 5-month, 2,000 km walk from central Kenya to the coast and back. I will be holding five full workshops along the route, in the bigger towns, as well as the talks I have with people while walking. I plan to start by June/July this year.

Right now, I'm knee-deep in finding corporate and individual sponsors, as well, and all the other logistics, meeting with potential sponsors, connecting with supporters, working on logistics, etc., the list goes on!!

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- I do have a Walking autism fundraising page where people can sponsor a kilometre — bit.ly/abbywalks.
- My Facebook page is [Walking autism](#).
- I'm on Instagram [@walking_autism](#) and Twitter [@Walkingautism](#).

"The mind is a beauty with its ability to analyse, appreciate and enjoy. It's a tremendous advantage to have this mind."



A Day in the Life of Hari Srinivasan, Promoter of Connection, Understanding, and Belonging

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Hari Srinivasan is a minimally-speaking autistic advocate and college student at UC Berkeley, California. He works tirelessly as a student, research assistant, and teacher. He is a Psychology major with a minor in Disability Studies, and so far has a 4.0 GPA and is Phi Beta Kappa. At UC Berkeley, he teaches a class about autism, and this summer he will be starting an independent year-long research project on autism as a Haas Scholar. Hari has a passion for learning about a variety of disabilities, as he feels it helps him understand autism better and gives him a broader perspective on the challenges that many people face.

Hari has been featured on President Obama's Instagram to help celebrate the 30th anniversary of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and is a student journalist at the Daily Californian. He's active on his college campus, even serving as the first nonspeaking autistic president of the student organization Spectrum At Cal, working to expand their outreach efforts and promoting "belonging" over mere "inclusion." He also serves on the board of ASAN (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network), one of the few organizations supported by the autistic community, and is a member of the Council of Autistic Advisors for the autism Society of America.

What does a typical school or regular day look like for you?

A typical day during the pandemic is a lot of screen time, typing or in Zoom, interspersed with maybe a walk, some exercise, music, TV (more screen time), and staring at the view of the beautiful Bay and the Golden Gate bridge from my window.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your schooling or work?

Philosophy & creative writing, especially poetry. I have written over 200 poems. Yoga, music, watching football, basketball, cricket, & tennis (I'm learning tennis).

How does being autistic help or hinder your work, schooling, or hobbies?

A multi-modal thinking which uses all my senses, not just traditional audio-visual, can be a huge advantage as you are weaving in many streams of thought and consciousness. The mind is a beauty with its ability to quickly grasp concepts, analyze, appreciate, and enjoy. It's a tremendous advantage to have this mind as I have to spend a majority of the time on the motor output part. For instance, in Calculus the instructor was writing out all the steps on the board. Even as he started, I had the answer, though if someone had asked me to type out all the steps, that would have taken me quite a long time as that is a motor task. I often feel I am on two complete opposite tracks with my mind and body. If I have to do a motor task, I can get completely lost and disoriented and distracted even between point A and B. Honestly, that part is tremendously frustrating and drags me down and leads to all kinds of anxiety and more "autism behaviors" which further slows me down.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

I think I am still trying to figure this part out (LOL) as my needs go beyond just the communication part, which is hard in itself. I'm constantly having to look for workarounds for each and everything. It's the ADHD, oral-motor apraxia, anxiety, lack of body schema, sensory processing, fine motor issues, body coordination issues, obsessive compulsive behaviors, mood regulation, misc. health issues, allergies, etc., all in one package called Hari. There is only so much that goes into the disability accommodations which are very academic oriented.

“So each day is like a new negotiation with my environment which has been quite the task and frankly quite exhausting.”

Much of the time, I’m not really feeling all that successful and quite burned out as I am trying to navigate through my maze of a day, day after day.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

Oh yes, all the time. My disability and “autism behaviors” are all too obvious, much of it quite involuntary, though there are still attempts at masking and camouflaging in other areas. So I can get either completely ignored and excluded or stared at with uneasy or disapproving looks in many places. And that is just the tip of the iceberg. Many, many instances by educators, neighbors, programs, professionals, and just folk on the street.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

No one is an expert on you. No one knows enough about autism to be an expert. Even the “experts” are still learning. So no one gets to have final say on what your limitations, capabilities, & needs are.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the so-called “experts” do you think parents should ignore? How can parents best support their non-speaking or minimally-speaking children?

Communication must extend beyond just basic wants. Basic wants are just survival. The next step up are needs around school/vocational/skills/interests which are necessary for building self-confidence and getting ahead. But real quality of life is the ability to express thoughts and opinions. So aim for that in communication—irrespective of the communication methodology used and whether it’s via speaking or via AAC.

On the “experts” part, I would repeat the advice to autistics above.

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

“The human race is so puny compared to the universe that being disabled is not of much cosmic significance.”
—Stephen Hawking

How did growing up without feeling represented in media affect you?

OMG. That was the essence of my recent article titled “Boy Like Me” for the Disability Visibility Project.

How does being a minimally-speaking autistic person affect your experience in higher education and in your advocacy work?

College has been an amazing experience for me as I have found a very supportive environment and faculty in Berkeley. I don’t know if this is the case in other places though. But for all that I get to do, I realize my college experience will still be just a fraction of that of my NT [neurotypical] peers or even my speaking autistic peers.

What kinds of topics do you cover in the college course on autism that you teach?

So it’s a combination of lectures, class discussion, student presentations, and guest speakers and panels. I manage to pack in a lot in our weekly 2-hour classes—from history, education, therapies, issues across lifespan (childhood – adulthood – geriatric), autism terminology, disability law, housing, relationships, family dynamics, identity, healthcare, mental health, translational research, law enforcement, tech, representation in media, and a bunch more. The 12-13 weeks of classes each semester are not enough to pack in all the additional topics I would like to cover.

“It felt so impactful when a former student from Europe recently emailed me to say that takeaways from this class led to her current research work.”

As one of the board members, in what ways do you contribute to ASAN?

I think I both learn and bring fresh perspectives as a both a minimally-speaking autistic and a person of color.

What are some aspects of advocacy work that you find especially fulfilling?

It is the opportunity, that dream, to make a contribution, even if it's a pebble, that will lend to that huge ripple of change.

On a lighter note, I used to obsessively watch Thomas the Tank Engine as a kid. And Thomas always wanted to be a “useful” engine. I guess I’m being “useful” too, now. LOL.

What would you like to do—given your education, work, and advocacy background—after graduation?

In the immediate future I hope grad school is in the cards for me. I’m passionate about learning and knowledge, and my mind is just thinking all the time and I want to do and contribute so much.

How can readers learn more about the experiences of non-speaking or minimally-speaking autistic people? Are there resources you’d like to point people to, or people online that you recommend following?

Just reading or following what a few of us are writing is not enough. Thought has to translate into action on the ground. Start by interacting with nonspeakers. There will be many in your neighborhood who are getting absolutely ignored or out of sight, tucked away in special education class or day programs. How will you learn unless you interact and start to include? Ask to start buddy programs at school if you are of school age. If a nonspeaker lives on your street, include them in your circle of friends and do things with them. There are many small things you can do at the grassroots level which together will make a huge difference and normalize the presence of every kind of human being in everyday society.

Is there anything else you’d like to share?

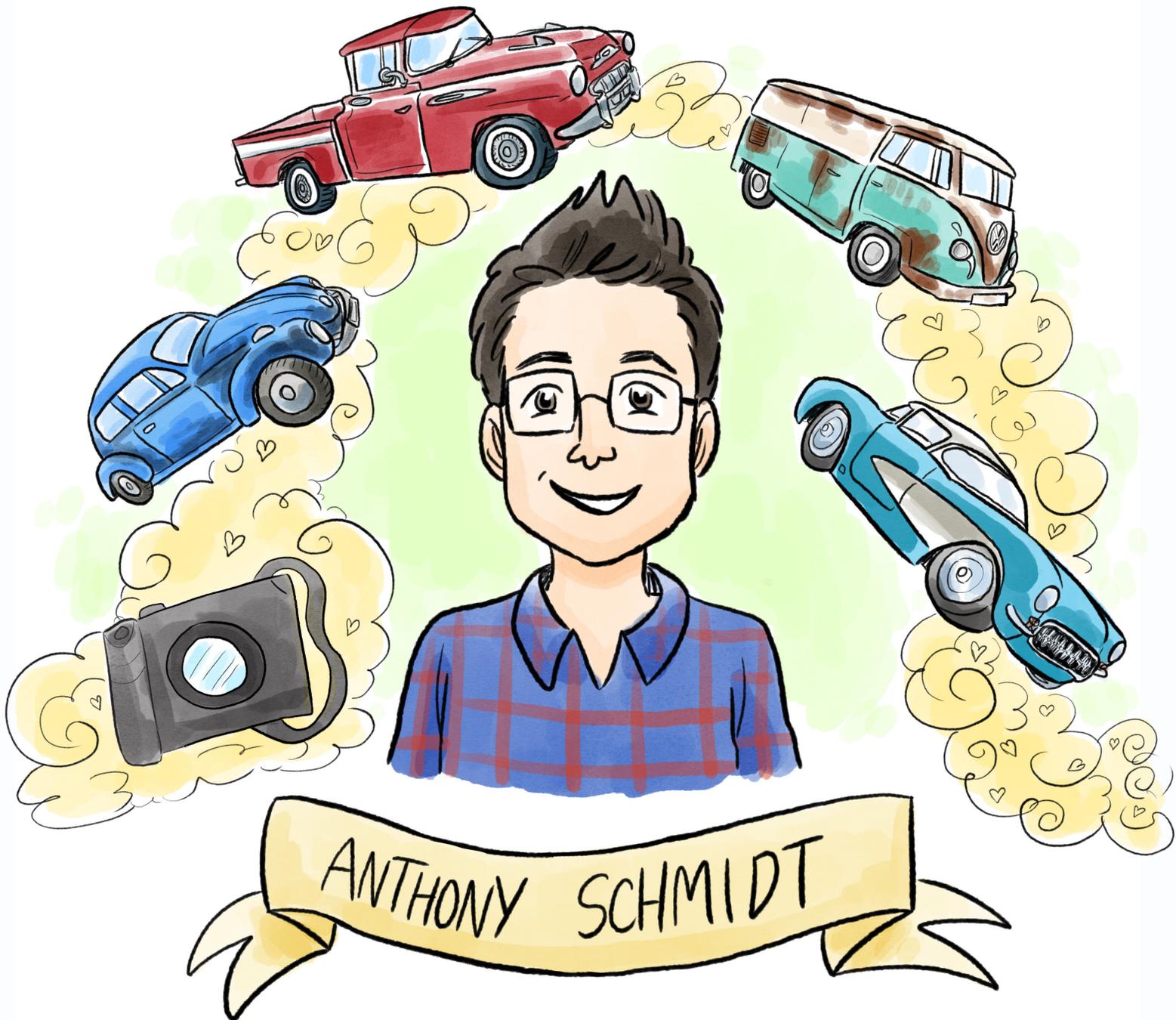
While it’s nice to see neurodiversity make inroads both in terms of awareness and on the DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] front, there needs to be a bigger effort to include the more marginalized groups like minimal/nonspeakers, and their support needs in such measures and conversations.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

I have a bunch of media for interested folks. I write about many things.

- Daily Californian: www.dailycal.org/author/haris
- Twitter: twitter.com/HariSri108
- Instagram: www.instagram.com/harisri108
- Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/108hari
- YouTube: tinyurl.com/108hari
- Blog: uniquelyhari.blogspot.com

"If you have a special interest, expand on it.
It might turn into something amazing."



A Day in the Life...Anthony Ryan Schmidt, Passionate Model Car Photographer

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Anthony Ryan Schmidt is a 12-year-old boy who is passionate about cars—especially model cars—and shares that passion with the world through his [compelling photography](#). In many of his photos, due to forced perspective, the cars look life-sized. In others, they just look fantastic.

Anthony has a real talent for photography, and his special interest in model cars gives him a photogenic and infinitely patient subject. In addition to collecting model cars and learning about cars in general, both old and new, Anthony modifies and distresses his models in his workshop himself and even designs his own sets, which helps make his photography look more realistic. He also has a supply of spare parts for use in repair and for junkyard photoshoots. Anthony has amassed a collection of about a thousand model cars that he keeps track of in a spreadsheet.

Anthony's love of cars began pretty much from the beginning of his life, with the ability to name the makes and models of cars even at two years old. After starting to take photos of cars at six years old, he eventually started sharing his photography online, and his fanbase grew from there. With his family's help with online engagement, he has become a bit famous. Anthony's talent is clear, even at his young age. He doesn't even edit his photos; they are just that good. We look forward to seeing where he takes this passion and talent in the future.

What does a typical school or weekend day look like for you?

Well, things are much different now due to COVID-19. Most days I have online school from 9am 'til 11am, then I play video games for a while. Towards the afternoon I like to work in my workshop fixing up

models and distressing them and modifying. I like to head out for photography around the “golden hour” when the sun is about to set and the lighting looks the best in my photography.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your school? Anything besides cars and photography?

I like to ride my bike and scooter in the neighborhood. I like to modify my bikes and scooters with underlighting. I like video games, Minecraft, Forza, and anything racing or car related. I'm a great cook; I like to make steak dinners, and roast beef, pizza.

How does being autistic help or hinder your schoolwork or hobbies?

I have misophonia, and sounds like chewing and pencil on paper are huge triggers, but I feel autism helps my hobbies because I see details others don't. Learning everything about cars is calming for me and I have a great memory and can name just about any car from the 1800s 'til the present day.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

I'm sure to take my ear protection with me everywhere I go. I like to take cars with me and, if I'm feeling stressed, I look at them or take photos.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

I think most people have experienced bullying; I'd like to teach people more about autism to end bullying.

What advice would you give to other young autistic people to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

If you have a special interest, go with it, expand on it. It might turn into something amazing. I started out collecting models, then one day I started taking photos. One thing leads to another and it's now inspiring lots of people to do the same.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

The experts told my parents that, “they better nip behaviors in the bud, or I wouldn’t amount to anything.” Punishing is not the answer. I’m glad my parents realized no one can predict anyone’s future, and [also realized] the reasons behind the behaviors.

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

To not allow a diagnosis to discourage me from doing anything, I often say,

“It’s just a diagnosis, it doesn’t mean you can’t have a great life.”

How did you get started with photography? What made you choose small cars to photograph? What kind of camera do you use?

I always collected cars since I was born, and I had a phone in my hand as long as I can remember. It was just natural that at 6 years old I started taking photos of them outside.

What do you love most about your special interest in cars? Do you have a favorite type of car?

I have no favorites; I love everything about cars and I love every car in the whole world.

Do you have a photography routine, or do you just take photos when the mood strikes you?

I really like routines; I take photos every day. It’s on my list of things I just have to do each day.

How does your family support your interests and autistic challenges?

My parents support my interests and are my biggest cheerleaders. My mother and grandmother run a Facebook group of over 140,000 followers to show off my photography. My mom helped create a coffee table book of my photography called [Small Cars, Big Inspiration](#).

What’s your favorite part about having an Instagram following?

I don’t have favorites, but I post all my own photos on Instagram.

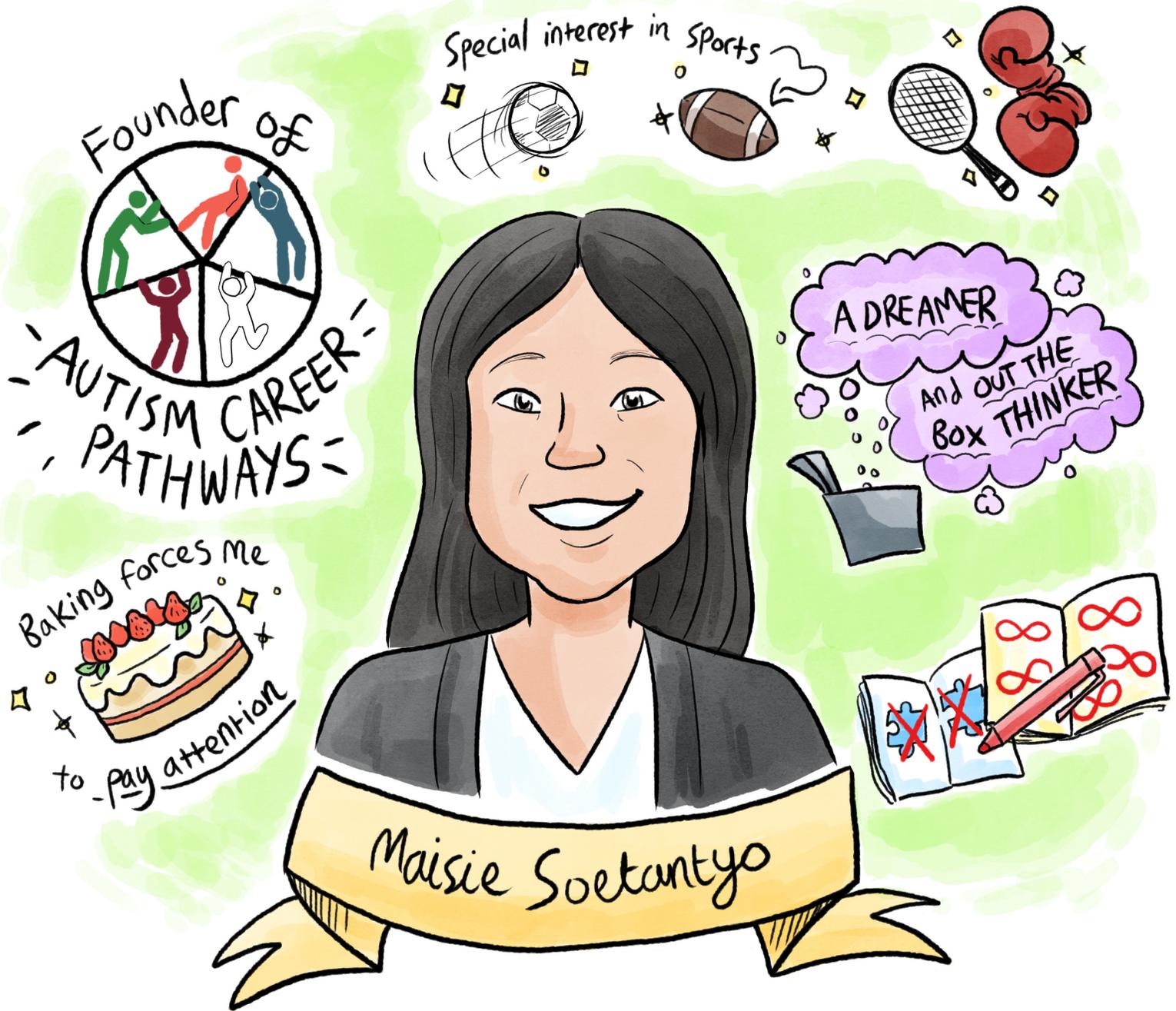
Is there anything else you want to share?

I have a big collection of model cars—about 1000 now—that I keep in a showroom. I was gifted a real car by a fan of my photography, a 1957 Ford Custom 300.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- Website is anthonyryanschmidt.com
- Instagram is [Anthony Ryan Schmidt](#)
- Facebook is “[Friends of Anthony Schmidt](#)” and “[Anthony Schmidt Photography](#)”

"I am autistic, and the good and bad that comes with it. I would not change a thing!"



A Day in the Life of Maisie Soetantyo: Advocate, Educator, Connector

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Maisie Soetantyo, M. Ed., is the founder of the non-profit autism Career Pathways, an organization located in the San Francisco Bay Area that works with autistic individuals and families to promote autistic-friendly parenting practices and encourage authentic living, as well as provide support and guidance for autistic individuals, especially when it comes to employment and the workplace. To reach these goals, Maisie works as a therapist, employment specialist, and parent and professional coach. Through autism Career Pathways, she works hard to show companies the value that neurodivergent employees can bring to the workforce, both individually and as part of a company's teams and culture.

Maisie herself is a late-diagnosed autistic who has experienced sensory and auditory processing disorders and learning challenges. She says that "her greatest enjoyment and gift is to advocate for her autistic clients through learning their 'native language' and translating autistic communication to family members." She uses these passions to make a difference in the world of autistic people, and using her own personal experiences helps her connect with others, and to help others connect with each other.

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you?

My day must start with a cup of coffee, then I usually do my advocacy and creative projects related to autism Career Pathways. That may include networking, working on online presentations, interviewing other autistics on their career journeys, or Zooming with clients. In between my "focused" time, I get up to pace and stim to reset.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

I make time for my special interests in baking, and watching or catching up with sports. Baking forces me to pay attention, use both of my hands, follow instructions, and take a screen break. For someone who struggles with executive functioning issues, baking is a way for me to engage, stay productive, and my family loves the outcome (most of the time)!

My second special interest is sports. Not playing sports unfortunately, but more sports watching and knowledge mining. This has been almost a lifelong passion. I have fond memories of me and my dad watching Mohammad Ali, Serena Williams, Diego Maradona, and many more when I was young. I try to schedule work activities around my NBA and NFL teams' schedule!

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

I think as an empath I connect very well to other autistic individuals, even with non-speaking autistics. My strength is showing parents how to connect and be in the moment with their autistic family member. I work hard to advocate on behalf of autistic children, so they can have unconditional love, respect, and a safe zone at home. Currently I have big projects to create an online platform with other autistic adults to change the early intervention landscape for autistic children and their parents.

"It's time to leave behind the pathology model in autism understandings."

My ability to pay attention to details is helpful when supporting my autistic clients explore special interests, or to find new strategies for family members to best accommodate their autistic family member.

I am definitely a dreamer and an out-of-the-box thinker. I am always thinking about new ideas and I am not afraid to ask and connect with others to initiate a new project. However, not everyone can see my vision, and my pace may be too fast or too scattered for others. I struggle with my communication with others especially during a period of sensory burnout. And I often “react” with my intense feelings and I can be quite explosive when I think I am right. Post diagnosis, I am still going through the process of “unlayering”: learning to self-regulate, to be kind to myself, and to set boundaries.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

Post diagnosis, I try to pay attention to my sensory triggers better. This means if I have to drive to visit clients at home or do lots of online meetings, I need to take a few days’ break. Sensory burnout is difficult to come out of, so I try to minimize it as much as possible.

As far as work accommodations, I don’t stick to a regular 9-5 schedule; instead I work any time my mind feels “sharp.” I depend on colored sticky notepads and alarms to cue me of important tasks I need to do daily. Lastly, I adjust my expectations all the time, so that if I could only complete 30% of my to-do list, I just have to keep going.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

Not so much bullying, but more being manipulated by others, and I don’t know how to get out of the situation. I am an easy prey, and people often call me “gullible”!

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

Exploring special interests and creating your own safe space is so important! Something that is your own unique way to express yourself in your own time and space, something you look forward to doing each day, something that motivates you to keep learning and connect with others. I truly marvel at other autistic adults’ special interests. Here are some: mushrooms, public transportation maps, photography, dinosaurs, life insurance, jewelry making, painting, animal massage, skateboarding, solo diving, aviation, etc.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves?

Once a child receives a formal diagnosis, parents begin to start looking outside of themselves for professional help. Instead of parenting intuitively, a parent of an autistic child becomes a therapist, driver, financial provider, schedule manager, homeschooler, or an online researcher!

“What professionals do not tell parents is that autistic children need their parents’ unconditional love and acceptance of their autistic identity. I firmly believe that a diagnosis without self-acceptance is a tough trajectory.”

My number one advice is to fall in love with your autistic child’s uniqueness every day. We have to be our child’s BEST detective and advocate, and yes, without using a functioning label or a deficit model. How do we do this when we are so worried about the developmental gap? By slowing things down, simplifying our schedule, and spending quality time together at home. Find time to just be a mom or a dad and hang out! When we let go of our need for our children to perform, only then we can connect with them.

My second advice is very important: meet your child halfway to set the “new normal.” Do set expectations but make adjustments on an ongoing basis. My personal story was my mom who helped me with my homework every day after school. She saw my learning challenges, and she supported me as best as she could. I was never bribed or punished for doing my best, even though I got a C-. I hang on to this memory today, that unconditional support from my parents helped me to do my best to overcome. Getting As was never discussed when I was a child, only doing my best.

I used to say to my clients “Don’t let autism define you.” Post diagnosis, I now say the opposite. “I am autistic, and the good and the bad that comes with it. I would not change a thing!” Knowing who you are as a person with or without autism is so important, and this applies to parents, children, and, also, autistic adults. Autistic children will grow up to become autistic adults, and a best scenario is when they have a positive autistic identity!

What advice from the so-called “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

Ignore any professional advice that makes you feel inadequate as a parent, and follow your gut instinct more. You are an awesome parent! Keep in mind that professional advice or social media information cannot “fix” problems quickly. It takes compassion, understanding, and a one-step-at-a-time mindset from the whole family to be able to implement a strategy.

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

Be kind to yourself, even more so when you struggle. Keep moving forward even when things are not according to your normal standards.

Coming from the perspective of an autistic person yourself, what do you find most rewarding about advocating for autistic people?

If I could somehow help connect the dots for autistic individuals and their families to have a better understanding of each other, and same for our community to be able to become a proactive supporter and employer of neurodivergent people, that would be a dream come true!

Tell us a bit about what your organization autism Career Pathways does to help autistic people. What ages does it serve? What services does it provide? Why is it an important service to the autistic community?

I created an all-activity-based career screening tool called CAPABL to replace commonly used verbal interviews for autistic adults 18 years old and up. Job seekers who participate in CAPABL would be able to use a personalized video resume to job hunt. This type of alternative career screening is important for non-speaking autistics who are more impacted by their autism conditions. I also want to spotlight all kinds of autistic talents, not just tech and science skill sets.

In addition, I created a strength-based career readiness training curriculum for autistic job seekers, family members, employment specialists, and businesses.

ACP hopes to promote workplace inclusion in all types of businesses. Our long-term goal is to build an online platform featuring a robust video training resources for small- to medium-sized businesses, as well as for home-based entrepreneurs. If more businesses in our neighborhood know how to hire and support neurodivergent individuals, that would be a game changer!

While we know this to be vital, why do you feel it’s important to involve autistic people in the creation of the autism Career Pathways programs?

The long-term goal is for companies of all sizes to be equipped to build their own full, inclusive culture, and, to make this happen, the building blocks and frameworks for best practices need to be designed by autistic people. If autistic and neurotypical employees can collaborate to create a successful neurodiverse hiring and support process, this is going to increase employability!

How do you help families work together as a team to help the autistic member be their best self?

My job is to help parents to reset their expectations of themselves as capable guides to their autistic family member. I help family members to move away from a “fix it” mindset to discovering autistic

differences as a valid way to connect with one another. As parents, we can only plant seeds of change and grow together as a family, and nurturing everyone's authenticity is the best way to go.

How do you help companies provide the best possible environment for autistic employees?

It's important to tell autistic employees that co-workers are willing to listen and be proactive when problems arise. Inclusivity needs to be immersed as a culture, and it's always a two-way street. Mentoring a neurodivergent apprentice brings out the best in everyone and cultivates excellence in leadership at work.

A quiet work environment with access to various sensory break opportunities, such as movement or fidget objects, is important. Allowing autistic employees to communicate their accommodation needs through written formats is really helpful because this process allows both sides to revise and take part in solutions, and at the same time be held accountable as well.

In general, when hiring an autistic person, adhere to respect, honesty, flexibility, and clarity in expectations and outcomes from both sides as best practices.

Do you work with companies who have autistic employees already?

We work with families to explore and build successful home businesses. Post COVID, ACP will be ready to train small businesses to implement CAPABL and mentors at work.

What are some of the most useful work skills you see already present among autistic people?

The ability to pay attention to details, to learn new skills efficiently, to show up to work on time, and to creatively problem solve.

Can you share one or two of your favorite success stories of autistic people gaining rewarding jobs or careers, or finding a rewarding life path?

Yes! One of my longtime clients is a talented musician, and based on the CAPABL assessment we figured out that he was also a good mentor. He is now building his own business as a music teacher, and he creates cool videos to teach autistic children to learn percussion and guitar!

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- autism Career Pathways website: autismcareerpathways.org
- [@maisiesoetantyo](https://www.instagram.com/maisiesoetantyo) on Instagram
- [@autismcareerpathways](https://www.instagram.com/autismcareerpathways) on Instagram

"Be you, there's only one of you. Know that you are not faulty or disordered."



EMMA DALMAYNE

A Day in the Life...Emma Dalmayne, Passionate Autism Rights Campaigner and Advocate

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Emma Dalmayne heads up the not-for-profit organization [Autistic Inclusive Meets](#) where she uses her experience raising her five autistic kids and her own knowledge of being autistic to create a community where autistic people feel supported. There, she promotes the acceptance of autism and helps autistic people socialize in an inclusive environment.

In addition, she has worked tirelessly against dangerous “treatments” and “cures” that are being promoted to parents of autistic kids to help rid their children of autistic traits. Those who make these harmful products are exploiting autistic people and their families by preying on parents who feel desperate for answers for how to help their children.

Emma has taken on both the anti-vaxers and those selling or promoting products like MMS (Miracle Mineral Solution) to try to educate people about their dangers, promote education about autistic people, and involve the authorities when she sees children and vulnerable adults in danger. MMS is being sold as a “supplement” online to parents as a way to “cure” their autistic children of their “symptoms,” but a major ingredient is a harmful industrial bleach that can be incredibly dangerous or fatal.

Since first learning of these fake and dangerous “cures” in 2014, Emma has worked to uncover websites selling these types of products. She infiltrates Facebook groups whose members promote them and talk about their experiences administering MMS doses to their children; Emma then passes on information to the police and social services. She’s also [fighting to make the UK government pass legislation](#) that will ban the marketing of such products to the public.

Emma extends her efforts to fight against pseudoscience in general, including when President Trump suggested using cleaners as a possible treatment for COVID-19, [co-writing an important article published in The New York Times](#) on the subject of “bleach cures” for everything from autism to cancer to COVID-19.

Emma has been campaigning for over five years, but these products still haven’t been banned in the U.S. or the UK, though in the U.S. the FDA has temporarily banned a church from selling MMS to treat COVID-19 because of false and misleading claims. From an FDA press release: [“When combined with the included activator MMS has a chlorine dioxide content equivalent to industrial bleach.”](#)

While working hard to uncover, expose, campaign, and fight against harmful treatments, Emma also fights against ableism and lack of appreciation for and understanding of neurodiversity in our society. She does all of this despite receiving threats of rape and other types of violence since joining UK health officials in promoting the MMR vaccine after a rise in Mumps cases—she also fights against the anti-vax movement, whose members often base their position on the completely discredited doctor, Andrew Wakefield. Emma says, [“As an autistic woman and mother to autistic children, I saw a need to challenge the negative rhetoric and incorrect claims of Dr. Andrew Wakefield.”](#)

Emma continues to receive threats on a regular basis from some people who promote MMS or are in the anti-vax community, but she takes this as an indication of just how important her advocacy work is:

“I’ve been campaigning for five years now, and I do get a lot of hate from people who use bleach on their children believing it can cure them of their neurological difference. And from people who are anti-vaccine who believe that vaccines cause autism and that we are a vaccine injury or some kind of fault or epidemic or holocaust. And it can be unpleasant.”

Emma has also received nasty phone calls, people have taken photos of her children, and someone even sent a tablet filled with distressing encrypted files to her house.

“It can be horrible. But the thing is I have to remember why I’m doing this. And the reason I’m doing this is for my children, my grandchildren, of which I have one. But there will be more. And for your children. For everybody’s children, actually, even the ones being abused with bleach. Mostly for them, because they need someone to stand up and say, ‘this is wrong’, and the more that they tell me I’m wrong for doing that, and the more they threaten me, it only makes me more determined and more stubborn to carry on doing it. Yeah, threats don’t work.”

Beyond the danger, parents using these types of treatments are sending clear signals to their autistic children that there is something wrong with them, rather than providing to their kids the important message that they happen to have a neurological difference with which they can still thrive, if they receive acceptance and understanding.

What does a typical day look like for you?

Right now, everything is up in the air due to the lockdown. Normally every Monday and Thursday, I am out with the kids running the AIM (Autistic Inclusive Meets) social and sensory groups. On Saturdays we would have AIM football. The rest of the week is spent chilling out, following the children’s interests, and outings. Now we are in as I am shielding, so the children are enjoying computer games, movies, painting, and their new trampoline.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work and home educating?

I love to write. I have written two books and I have a blog. I co-own a group on Facebook as well: autism Inclusivity. I love to spend time snuggled with the kids watching movies, playing with our two puppies, and reading.

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

It helps me hyper focus. If I am giving something attention, trust me, it gets my ALL!

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

I usually accidentally don’t. I campaign against autistic abuse and end up burnt out. A lot of what I see in my work is very distressing. When I do remember, I give myself breaks, watch a silly film, or cook. I love to cook!

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

I was once told upon telling an attendee at one of our groups that I am autistic, “Wow and you did all this? Well done, you...”

I was bullied dreadfully as a teen and realize now it’s because I just didn’t fit in, and when I tried, it didn’t work.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

Be you. There’s only one of you. Seek out other autistic peers and know that you are not faulty or disordered. The world is.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What has helped you with your own kids? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

Accept. Don’t externalize your child’s autism and look on it as an enemy to be beaten. Your child is wholly autistic so embrace, enable, and support.

Don’t take on your child’s identity. You are the parent of an autistic child, not an “autism mom/dad.” That’s identity appropriating.

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

“Emma, not everyone is going to do what you do and react how you would.”

How has being autistic helped you relate to and connect with your autistic children?

I realize when they are overwhelmed and can redirect to sensory stimuli or to a dark room to regulate. I know how they feel just by looking at them.

How has it helped you educate them at home?

We unschool; my children are not the sit down at a desk and learn type. Both are very active, they love to explore, to run and climb. They love documentaries and conspiracy theories, deciding things after researching themselves. They learn at a different rate compared with others their age in mainstream, so we take things slow and follow their interests. Museum trips, nature rambles, and art. Social groups and just having the time to not rush makes such a difference.

What’s a big myth about autism that you work hard to dispel or fight against?

- That autism is an injury or a disease. That it can be cured or purged.
- Or beaten out of a child.
- That bleach or turpentine can cure autism.
- That we are an epidemic or a holocaust.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- Organization is www.autisticinclusivemeets.org
- My books are on www.stasspublications.co.uk.
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/autisticinclusivemeets
- Twitter: twitter.com/EDalmayne

"Find the one person who actively understands and accepts you"



A Day in the Life...Anthony Harrison, AI and Human-Robot Interaction Expert

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Anthony Harrison lives in the Washington, D.C., area and spends his days taking care of his cats, pursuing his varied interests, and, in his day job, progressing the field of human-robot interaction. Anthony works as a research psychologist at the US Naval Research Laboratory in the Intelligent Systems section, where he delves deep into artificial intelligence. He earned his PhD from the University of Pittsburgh in 2007, where he specialized in the simulation of human cognition.

Anthony regularly infuses his life with new interests and hobbies, taking advantage of breaks in his schedule to dig deep and learn All the Things about a new area that interests him. And, though he admits that humans are more complicated than robots, he also makes time for a social life. His personal experiences with being perceived as different from others helped guide his career choices, and he is grateful to his parents for giving him the space to be himself.

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you?

Well, my cats keep me on a fairly tight schedule. Up early to feed the beasts and myself and then I start working from home while I wait out DC's notorious traffic. These two to three hours are generally my most productive as I knock out low hanging fruit (i.e., programming) without any human interruptions. After the traffic has broken, I'll head in, sometimes on bicycle to get my exercise.

I work at the US Naval Research Laboratory as a research psychologist studying human-robot interaction.

“More specifically, I take psychological theories of how people reason and problem solve and create AIs that mimic the behaviors observed during experimentation.”

We then take these AI and put them on robots. The robot can use them to guide their own behavior and to better anticipate human needs.

Mornings are for theory work, programming, and writing papers. Afternoons are for meetings and lab time with the robots. A few hours of working with robots is enough frustration for anyone. After work, it's back home to feed the beasts and myself—then either relaxing at home or some hobby time. Maybe if I'm feeling fully charged, and not subject to COVID shutdown, something social.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

I'm a collector of hobbies and interests. You know the deal: deep, obsessive interest in some random area. In my life something always comes up and the routine is broken. I often use that time to find something new to try. Most interestingly rock climbing and trapeze, before that glass-blowing and knots. I'm thinking of returning to SCUBA diving when COVID is finally mitigated. But currently my hobby is consuming COVID information and trying to maintain some semblance of a dating life.

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

When doesn't a laser-like focus of attention help? Seriously, when there is a theoretical or programming challenge, I'm all in. I can focus for hours on hours until the problem is solved. That's the good side. The bad side is that I often get stuck obsessively searching for a solution. Fortunately, I have coworkers that can help me avoid those traps.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

It's ironic, being a psychologist, but I avoid people as much as I can. They're just so messy in reality—nothing at all like the nice, clean theories I play with. Fortunately, I work in a relatively small lab, my coworkers are very accepting, and my boss has been accommodating. If I have to interface with people (give a talk, briefing, tour), I always get plenty of notice so I can adequately prepare and not feel any unnecessary pressure.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

It was seventh grade. I was standing at my locker when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and was immediately decked—dropped like a sack of bricks. I looked at my attacker, having no idea who he was. It was some of random violence social pressure thing. He high-fived his buddies and disappeared down the hall. I would later learn that I was attacked because I was a “nerd”. I couldn't make sense of it. The randomness of it.

“What made me a “nerd” worthy of singling out and attacking? So began my interest in human psychology and motivation.”

I quickly learned that it was my nonverbal signals that helped set me apart: hunched shoulders, eyes downcast, more books than friends. I altered those behaviors I could, and so began my life of masking, guided by the study of psychology all in service of self-defense.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life?

The only path to happiness is through other humans. It sucks, they're messy, complicated, and likely to hurt you, but they are ultimately worth it. No matter how much you fail, there is still a chance to find that one person who actively wants to understand and accept you for who you are. That's the theory at least.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

That one is tough. Asperger's wasn't even a diagnosis until after I graduated high school. I wasn't diagnosed until my later 30s. Neither my parents nor I suspected I was anything other than just odd—gifted, but odd. They gave me enough space to be myself, which I am eternally thankful for. They also pressured me into social activities like Boy Scouts and the like. I was less thankful at the time, but now I appreciate it. I guess my best advice is to adapt to your child—they've all got different needs and different ways to scaffold.

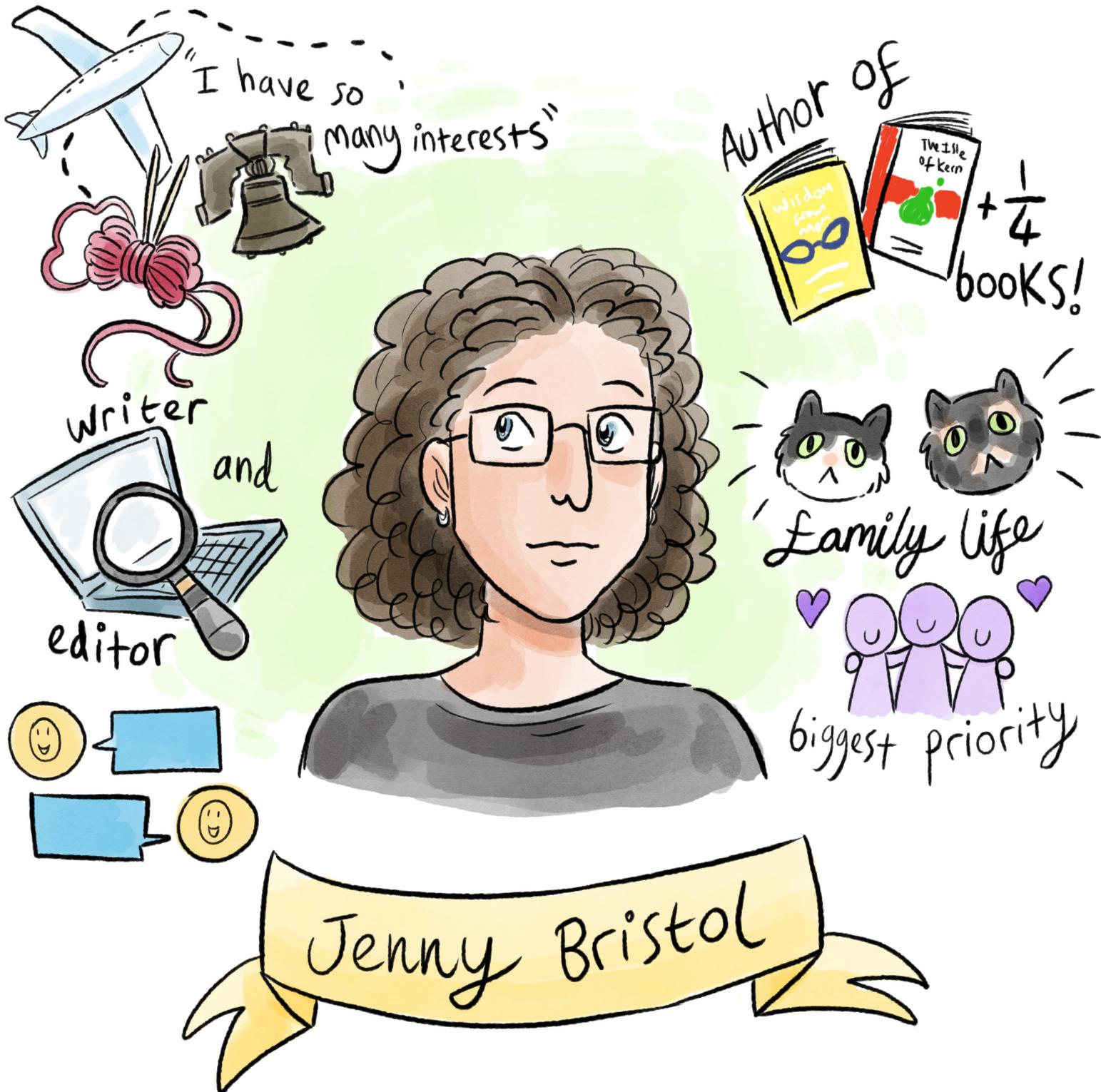
What made you decide to work in robotics?

Robotics was just the natural landing place. I already mentioned how I developed a taste for psychology, but computers were always my first love. Programming has always come naturally. I worked to merge the two by focusing on AI. What good is a human-like AI if you don't give it a body to interact with? Robotics can be a kind of existence proof for psychological theories.

What is one thing (or several things) about working with robots that people might not expect?

It's not all Terminators and Skynet. The robot apocalypse isn't coming anytime soon. The smartest robot is still nothing more than a tantrum-throwing toddler. Robots are more like classic cars: really expensive and you spend more time keeping them running than running themselves.

"I am not broken; I am whole.
I live my life on my own terms now."



A Day in the Life...Jenny Bristol, Freelance Writer and Author

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

You didn't think you could get out of here without learning a bit about me, too, did you?

Jenny Bristol (that's me!) is a freelance writer and author, homeschooling parent of two teenagers, and classic nerd. She's published 2 1/4 books (so far) and spends her days reviewing educational websites/games/apps and facilitating the life and education of her family. She was diagnosed quite late—at age 45—so had to learn to navigate childhood, adulthood, and parenthood without the context of understanding autism. She is grateful for that, however, since she still managed to learn a lot of skills to get by in our society, mostly on her own.

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you (or, if there isn't a typical day, describe one that is representative of your work/regular life)?

I get up, check my email, Facebook, and other social media, then go take a shower and have breakfast. Then I settle into whatever my “work work” is for the day, be it writing a blog post or reviewing an educational website or scheduling posts at GeekDad and GeekMom. I regularly have to put down my work, though, to facilitate my son's homeschooling, to help my daughter through yet another college essay, to go with my husband to a doctor appointment, or to settle disputes among our cats. Because of this, I'm often working off and on all day long, every day of the week. I've gotten used to this lifestyle where I'm unable to focus on my paying work for too long in one stretch, but it makes me exceptionally inefficient. But my family is my biggest priority, so I make sure I continue to be available to them, since even teenagers (sometimes especially teenagers) need their parent, and I know they'll be on their own far too soon. There will be plenty of time to focus more on work later.

In the meantime, I am treasuring this time together while we have it. We also try to carve out at least one night per week for more focused family time where all four of us do something fun together.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

I have so many interests. I love making things in general, so I often sew, crochet, knit, or do needlework, but my husband Rory and I are also learning the craft of old-fashioned letterpress printing. I am also extremely passionate about travel, American history, my own family history and genealogy, and logic puzzles and trivia (I love testing myself). In addition to writing for work, I also write for myself since I have a lot to say on a wide variety of topics, as well as having plenty of fiction ideas. I've self-published two books already and have many more in-process. I've also rediscovered that I like drawing, especially digitally, so I've been trying to do that more. In general, though, I just love to learn.

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

With my hobbies, I think being autistic has only been a help. For example, my autistic traits are completely tied into my love of logic puzzles. The puzzles just make sense, and my brain is able to make intuitive leaps, which makes me very good at them. I love crafts because I'm able to make something by following a set of instructions, which is enjoyable for me. Sometimes I create altogether new things, but even they are usually based on other things. I think my curiosity about where I come from and about the wider world only support my enjoyment of and choice of hobbies. As for work, my attention to detail and strong sense of responsibility have made me an excellent proofreader and evaluator of privacy policies (another thing I've done for work). I notice things that other people don't, and that's a real advantage. It's made me a reliable freelancer in general, as I always abide by deadlines and due dates. And it's helped with my writing, because writing is just a series of patterns that you mix and match to create new things.

I communicate better in writing than by speaking, so being a writer is a great career option for me. On the other hand, being autistic has made it hard for me to work in a 9-5 job in a traditional office setting. I've done it many times, but I've always been miserable. I'm much more comfortable working at home and being able to set my own schedule. This provides more flexibility, but also a lot more financial uncertainty. So, as with everything, there are tradeoffs.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

If I have a lot to do outside the house in a given week, I try to pack it into as few days as possible. I function best when I have at least 2-3 days per week where I don't have to leave the house, since this gives me more uninterrupted work time and time to recharge. I may still end up leaving the house on the other days for grocery or library runs, but I can do those whenever it's convenient since they aren't scheduled. I prefer to fit obligations around my life rather than my life around my obligations, and I've (mostly) set my life up to accommodate that.

I also end up doing a lot of my socializing online. I have countless friends whom I talk with daily, which is easier to take a break from when I need it than when I'm with someone in person.

"I feel I can be myself more online than I can in person, so I've actually had deeper connections with friends online than with most people in person."

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

In elementary school and junior high, I was bullied relentlessly. Throughout, from 3rd grade through 8th grade, people at school made my life miserable.

I looked different from other people, acted differently, got good grades, and all of that made me an easy target for the cruelty of other kids, which made my intense anxiety even worse. Despite going to a science & tech high school with a bunch of fellow nerds (which was GREAT, by the way), there were still some microaggressions even then, such as getting picked last for teams, receiving disparaging looks, hearing insulting comments behind my back, and other things. But at least it wasn't as bad, and I had some great friends and sufficient dates in high school. As an adult, I've come to value and appreciate those who made and make me feel welcome and accepted all the more.

I don't think I've experienced any other types of discrimination because of my autistic traits, though. I'm very good at putting on a temporary mask to get through things like job interviews, meetings, doctor appointments, and the like. I just can't keep it up for long.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

It's fine to not like what other people like. Just because "everyone" likes something doesn't mean there's something wrong with you if you don't like it. You can hate it, even. Choose to revel in what you truly enjoy. For example, I've learned that it's okay to take joy in following precise directions (like with building LEGO kits), and in thriving from routine. I often begin doing things in a certain way to help me not forget steps, but I now realize that I enjoy the process too.

Get rid of the phrases "supposed to" and "should." Once you start ignoring what society thinks you're supposed to do or how you're supposed to act or be, you can start living your own life by your own rules. Revel in the things that make you in particular happy, with no regard to societal norms.

Try to arrange your life around your strengths and interests. Sometimes you DO have to do things you don't want to do, jumping through hoops that were not designed for you, and it's important to know how to do that. But the sooner you can learn how your mind operates and cultivate those interests of yours, the better. One of your passions may turn into a career, or may just make your life outside of work richer. Remember: Learning for the sake of learning is not just okay, it's what life's all about.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

Help your kids find “their people.” Help them find friends who share their interests, who are patient, compassionate, and open to meeting new people. These people may not be their school classmates. They may not even be in your local homeschool group. They may be people older or younger than your kids. I grew up in the days before the internet, so it was hard to find people who were like me. But when I started going to a nerdy high school, I found more people who were “my people.” I also spent the vast majority of my teenage social life on BBSes, which was the pre-internet equivalent to forums, email, and chat rooms. This introduced me to many of “my people” and gave me the skills for finding more of them as my life went on.

“Also: You don't need to “fix” your child's autism. Your child is not broken. There isn't a different child hiding inside, behind the autism. Your child is who you see, and their needs are completely valid, even if those needs seem odd or unimportant to you.”

Respect their needs when they communicate them (with or without words) and help them learn skills to work with or around their challenges. Be the safe place for your children. Also, study them closely for glimpses into their special interests and talents. Then encourage them in those areas, as that can help their confidence and help lay the groundwork for their future. Focus on their strengths, not what you might perceive as deficiencies.

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

There hasn't really been one single piece of advice. Mostly it's been my own self-study combined with surrounding myself with people who care about me and accept (and often celebrate) me for who I am, especially my mom, my husband, and my children. I inhabit an environment where I learn about, understand, and value all the parts of myself that have been at various times called weird, annoying, or even broken. I am not broken; I am whole. I live my life on my own terms now.

How did learning you were autistic so late at the age of 45 affect you?

Once it became clear that I was autistic, I started reevaluating my entire life up until then, studying it all through an autistic lens. Everything finally made sense, and I'm still coming to eye-opening realizations about my past actions, experiences, relationships, and interactions with others. I'm still reprocessing my life, two years later. It's been a wholly positive experience.

Because I wasn't diagnosed young (in fact, I'd never even heard of autism until I was an adult), I had to learn to navigate school, college, adulthood, relationships, parenting, work, and more without a full understanding of myself and how my brain worked. I'm actually grateful to not have been diagnosed earlier, though, since it's only been recently that the autistic community has worked to support each other and to educate the so-called “autism experts,” and I feel that any “intervention” when I was younger would have done more harm than good.

I'm grateful to have the words to express myself about it now, and to help any autistic people around me who struggle to understand themselves. Seeing that look of recognition, or those words of epiphany, is so rewarding.

My patterns of living and my interests and what my needs are and were is so much clearer in hindsight, with decades of patterns to look back on. I wish I had understood myself better earlier, but overall I like the way this all unfolded for me.

What do you see as some of your strengths that you can attribute to being autistic?

The ability to notice patterns, both literal patterns and patterns of behavior, in myself and others. This ability has helped me look back on my own life and figure myself out more, which is how I figured out I might be autistic in the first place. It also helps me relate to others, matching what I observe in others' behavior with what I've experienced or witnessed or heard about in the past. This helps me give wise counsel.

My feeling of personal responsibility and living up to my commitments. My punctuality and reliability. These make me a valuable friend and employee/contractor and have opened doors and provided opportunities for me.

My incredibly strong empathy. This helps me be a better partner to my husband, a better mom to my kids, and a better friend to my friends. It also means that I need to keep a protective bubble around myself, though, to keep myself from becoming too overwhelmed by all the hate and pain in the world.

Is there anything else you'd like to share regarding your life as an autistic person?

I have a slightly different point of view from many autistic people about masking. Once I learned how to create them for myself, I figured out how to put on and take off my masks at will, using them as my own toolbox for successfully navigating life situations. Keeping them on too long is exhausting, though, which is part of why I prefer to work from home and can only work part time. But for job interviews, meetings, interactions at the bank, making phone calls... For all those, I put on my designated mask and just get through it. Putting on the proper mask at the right time makes my life easier and gets me through situations with fewer problems and inconveniences. But then I take it off as soon as I can. Sometimes I enjoy putting on a mask, since it's kind of like taking a break from your usual self—and when you're someone with a lot of anxiety like me, it can help you break out of anxious cycles of thinking. I just can't do it all day, every day.

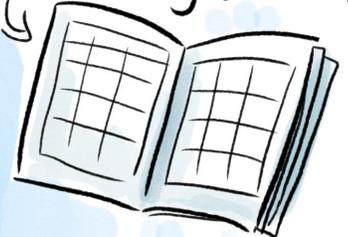
What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- Website: www.jennybristol.com
- Twitter: [@jennywbristol](https://twitter.com/jennywbristol)
- Instagram: [@jennywrenbristol](https://www.instagram.com/jennywrenbristol)
- Facebook Page: facebook.com/jennywbristol

"Stand firm in understanding who you are"



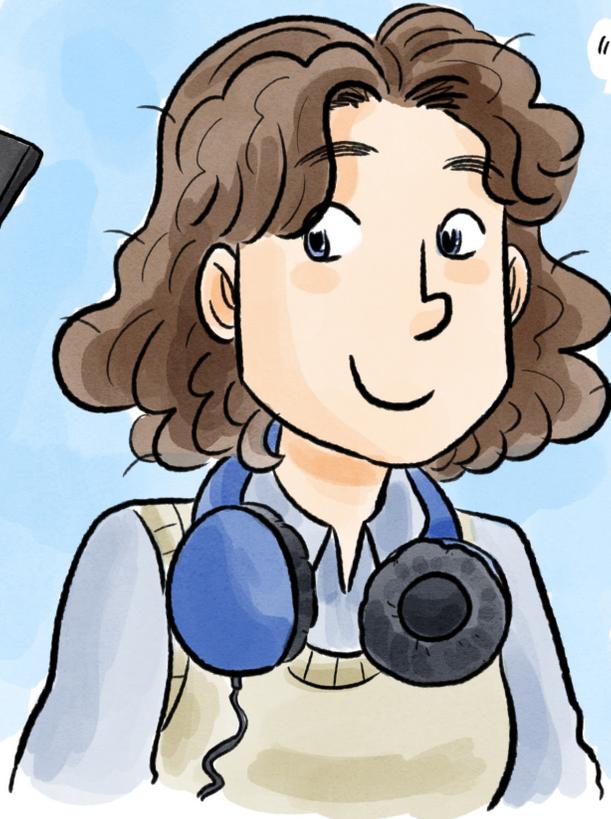
"I have a very scheduled life"



small press



comic artist



Rebecca Burgess

A Day in the Life...Rebecca Burgess, Illustrator and Comic Artist

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Rebecca Burgess is a talented and creative illustrator and comic artist who works to both create beautiful things and increase positive dialogue surrounding important issues such as autism and asexuality. They have an exquisite talent to communicate so much emotion through their art, with facial expressions telling at least half the story. Their style is at once familiar, comfortable and fresh. They do freelance work as well as personal projects, and you can peruse much of their work at their [website](#) and on [Tapas](#) as well as see their autism-related work at Geek Club Books. Through a lot of reflection, Rebecca has learned what supports they need to be their most thriving and successful self, creating a life and career that works for them in the process. They live in the UK.

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you (or, if there isn't a typical day, describe one that is representative of your work/regular life)?

Because I'm both extremely forgetful and introverted, I have a very scheduled life to make sure I get stuff done, and that forces me to keep up with friends! Even though I freelance from home, I normally get up at the same time every week day and work from 9-5. I like to read books and comics specifically in my lunch hour, and then normally spend my evenings playing video games and working on personal art projects (mostly comics!). Then I make sure I'm out in the evening twice a week to do something with friends, normally playing board games.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

Even though I spend all day drawing for work, my main hobby is still drawing in my free time. I really love drawing comics, and I have a gazillion stories in my head, so making comics is my biggest hobby.

My other favourite things are Lord of the Rings, nature (going outside and exploring/bird watching), and history; I've always in particular been interested in Mozart and Edwardian history. I have lots of fun playing board games and role playing games with friends—I particularly love M:tG and Call of Cthulhu!

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

I would say being autistic both helps and hinders all of these things. The good thing about who I am is that I'm so intensely interested in drawing/comics that I rarely get "art block" or find it hard to be motivated in doing side projects outside of work, so I'm very productive. Because I find socialising tiring I don't get "cabin fever" and find it really easy to just focus on work, even though I'm working from home and by myself. I think, as well, I tend to have a constant flow of ideas for stories and art projects because my brain doesn't stop thinking.

"My passion for comics and stories means that I also find it really easy and love to talk about other people's projects with them, and many creative friends have told me it's nice to have someone who is really passionate about what they're doing to help motivate them."

The downside to being autistic is the social side and my bad executive function skills. I'm the most forgetful person I know for everyday basic tasks, and it means I'm really bad at doing the kind of stuff that you need to do as a freelancer to keep work going and keep yourself on clients' radars—like following up with e-mails and keeping up with messages on social media, etc. Then there's the whole networking thing that has always eluded me. A lot of people in my line of work get jobs by going to events, conferences, and comic cons regularly and meeting/socialising with people. But I really struggle with these sorts of things because it's both very exhausting, and the sensory overload

ends up making me feel unwell and I end up having meltdowns or panic attacks in the hotel rooms after it's over. This also happens with certain hobbies like music gigs and comic conventions. I normally still like to go and just endure the ramifications, but don't go as often as some of my other friends because of the physical/mental impact it has, and I normally have to rest for a long time afterwards.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

I keep to a schedule and keep a diary where I can plan events and meeting up with people in advance. This allows me to keep track of social and quiet time, so that I don't end up doing too much "social time" in one week and then feeling overwhelmed. I always make sure I have at least 4 "quiet time" days in a week.

"A diary also helps me keep track of small tasks I normally forget to do, like paying bills on time or contacting friends. I also normally have a day to day routine that has specific time put away for different things, so that I don't forget to do household chores/tasks."

I try not to go overboard with this though, because planning every little thing can end up being stressful (and my brain has a tendency to do that). With socialising, I tend to plan things in advance like board game nights or going to see a film; this way NT friends are happy to set aside time rather than be spontaneous, and if I'm tired I can do something that doesn't always require too much talking (e.g., if you go to a cinema, you don't have to concentrate on talking too much). I would say all of this has helped stop me from becoming stressed or overtired, and generally keeps me on top of adult life stuff that I otherwise end up forgetting about.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

Yes. I was bullied so, so much in school just for being "weird" that it became just part of everyday life and I didn't even realise how much I was being bullied until

I went to art college, where everyone was just as weird as me and I suddenly knew how it felt to be part of a group and not face ridicule every single day. I think, realistically, kids just didn't quite know how to react to someone who was clearly different and who also was very quiet/not good at talking. Kids thought I was stoned I think because my speech is very slurred/slow, haha. They called me "Forrest Gump" because of how I walked/acted. I didn't like having my hair cut or wearing tight clothes, so the "scruffy" look I had probably didn't help.

In adult life I wouldn't say it's as bad, but I still have difficult situations. I wasn't diagnosed until I was an adult, and the first time I disclosed to a potential client during a work interview, they suddenly started patronising me and saying things like, "Wow, good for you to be doing so much," and then never called me back for an illustration job they had said they wanted me specifically to do. Because of this, I'm very wary of saying to anyone in the working world that I'm autistic. At the same time, not saying I'm autistic can also be a problem, in that people take some things for granted and then get annoyed or think I'm being annoying on purpose when I, say, misunderstand what someone's said or need to be told more than once how to do a task in a job before I understand or remember how to do it.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

It can be really easy to not stand up for yourself if you're feeling uncomfortable, tired, or overwhelmed in relationships and social situations. It can be very easy to assume you are the one who needs to work harder or keep up with friends who might be demanding or put up with certain situations. I think that if you're autistic, you tend to worry more than others about keeping friendships and assuming you are the one that needs to accommodate another person in friendships, school, work, etc.

“My advice is to stand firm in understanding who you are and what your limits are, and trust that you won’t lose friendships if you decide to take life at your own pace, say no to things you’re not comfortable with that others are, or ask for people to give you space or accommodations.”

I hope that’s not too generalised a piece of advice, but that’s the best I can think of to cover a wide range of issues I find myself and other autistic people I know having!

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

Let your kids take their time in overcoming fears and obstacles, and trust a little bit more that they WILL be okay. There’s a lot of stuff that my parents used to push and push me to do against my will, because they thought that forcing me to do something that was stressing me out would be the only way I would get over the fear and actually do it (e.g., talking to people, going to loud places, eating certain foods). Because we are seemingly set in our ways, it’s possibly hard to see autistic people ever doing new things without the assistance of others. But in my experience, letting me take my time and then get over an obstacle in my own way is HOW I then overcome it.

Unless a stim, behaviour, routine, or attachment is actually hurting a child or someone else, don’t make them stop it or believe it to be “harmful.” Just because a behaviour is unusual or frowned upon by society doesn’t mean that it’s inherently bad for the person doing it. (In example, an “expert” might work on getting a child to stop stimming, or widen their interests, or stop carrying around a baby toy. The only harm being done is that people think this is “weird,” but frankly, I’d say most autistic kids probably care much more about doing the thing that makes them happy than how they might look to other people.)

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

This was advised to me before I was diagnosed autistic, but I think at a time when I was really worrying about how I wasn’t keeping up with my peers in terms of “growing up,” it helped to be told that it’s okay to take my time and do things at my own pace. This turned into me not just doing things at my own pace, but also just flat out not doing stuff that other people were doing (like going to parties, dating, or making lots of friends). I spent a long time assuming that I must not be happy if I don’t force myself to do these things that are supposed to be the key to happiness. Learning to be super comfortable with doing everything differently is the best thing I’ve ever done.

How do you choose the topics of your personal comics and illustrations?

With comics, I like to input personal experiences into the stories, or draw things that I really want to see myself but haven’t seen anywhere yet. In example, for my latest comics I’m talking about phobias, asexuality, and fear of change a lot, drawing from my personal experiences. I’m also frustrated with the lack of autistic characters or autism experiences in fictional stories, so my most recent fictional stories all have autistic main characters. In illustration, I really like drawing animals and nature the most; there’s just so much variety and inspiration to be drawn from real life when it comes to nature!

Do you have a favorite comic series or illustration that you’ve done (paid or unpaid)?

It’s really hard to pick a favourite since I really enjoy everything I get a chance to do in the moment of doing it. I’m really enjoying a personal project I’m working on right now called [The Song Collector](#). It combines two different special interests: history and folk music! And because it’s a drama with an autistic main character based partially on myself, I’m getting to draw out lots of personal experiences and issues I’ve never explored before. It’s really fun to draw lots of expressions and conflict too, which is why I decided to draw a drama series.

What do you wish more people in society knew about asexuality?

I think the main thing I want to explain about asexuality is that it's perfectly normal and waaay more common than people think. The stigma I find with asexuality at the moment is that people assume that having no interest in sex/sexual attraction means that there must be something wrong with you, that it's something you can control (i.e., asexual people are being wimps, making it up to feel special, need to see a therapist), and basically that it's not something that's real. I want to talk about asexuality openly and highlight how many people are ace, in order for it to be more acknowledged and therefore respected by people.

I hear a lot of people say, "Why do you need to make such a big deal out of just not having sex, who cares?" I think these people probably equate the experience of being asexual with their experience of the points in life when they don't have sex, and so think, "Well, I get on just fine, so why are these people complaining?" My answer to this is that we're living in a culture where sex education, media, and our peers suggest things like, "no sex in the relationship means the relationship is going wrong," or, "you don't fully love someone unless there's sex involved," or, "you're not a real adult and your life is depressing if you're still a virgin by 30." Realistically, when you grow up in our culture, the assumption is that you WILL have sex at some point.

If you're just in between relationships, your experience of this culture will be something like, "Well, it's fine I'm not having sex because I will soon find someone and my life will fulfil these expectations again." If you're asexual however, it's more along the lines of, "I'm never going to live up to these expectations and never physically can, and I'm tired of family asking why I haven't found someone yet/being told there's something wrong with me/being forced into having sex in order to prove that I love my partner." That's the difference, and why we need to keep talking about it or put a label on the thing we're not doing.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

Twitter and Instagram! Although I apologise in advance for taking a long time to reply, I follow my own advice and take things at my own pace!

- Twitter: [@theorah](#)
- Instagram: [@theorahart](#)

“My happiest Moments are when I'm living authentically”



A Day in the Life...Lyric Holmans, Neurodivergent Rebel

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Lyric (formerly known as Christa) Holmans is a bold and dynamic advocate for autistic people and neurodiversity. To help accommodate their own needs, they live in an RV while also working remotely in a full-time leadership position on top of their advocacy work. They are the pioneer of the important #askingautistics hashtag on Twitter, allowing anyone—whether or not they are autistic themselves—to ask questions of autistic people so they can get an Own Voices perspective.

Lyric works long hours but maintains healthy boundaries by unplugging on evenings and weekends to allow time for self-care and to maintain relationships. They love rules and structure and work hard to master things they're passionate about. They feel that their gifts come from their neurodiversity just as much as their struggles do, and that the diversity of our population allows us to help each other. This interview includes some great advice for young autistics along with important perspective for parents of autistic kids.

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you (or, if there isn't a typical day, describe one that is representative of your work/regular life)?

If I'm not traveling/speaking, I wake up most mornings around 5:00am. I am typically on the computer and ready to start my NeuroRebel work by 5:30am. In the mornings I check social media, NeuroRebel emails, and work on writing and other collaborations related to my autism work. If I'm memorizing a speech, I will work on that in the morning too. I normally conclude these tasks by 7am and prepare to log into my full-time job with the Austin Alliance Group by 7:30am.

If it's a regular work day, I typically work remotely from 7:30am–5:30pm. I can do my “office work” from anywhere as long as I have the internet and a phone signal. I try to schedule any interviews/podcasts for the afternoon (after 2pm, when our 4 dogs are sleeping). Sometimes content creation is tricky in a small space. Then, I normally work on NeuroRebel tasks for at least another hour before logging off for the day between 6:30pm & 7:00pm.

Then I unplug, and shutdown my laptop. I have a policy, to encourage self-care and prevent burnout, that I do not work evenings/weekends. Also, because I tend to be an “all or nothing” type person, this is essential to making sure my personal real-world relationships don't fall apart. Otherwise I can neglect people.

The travel days look VERY different when I do speaking & presentations.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

On weekends, we RV, traveling to nearby destinations—often parking near water (lakes, rivers, the ocean). In the past I've had some wild hobbies—from circus arts, fire spinning, and Acrobatic Yoga to animal behavior and human psychology.

Other than my blog—which has been my BIGGEST hobby for the past 3 years—my current hobbies and interests are mostly focused on communication and business psychology, but I also enjoy creative activities, like web and graphic design.

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

I'm either an expert at something or I suck at it. There is no in between. If I love something, eventually I'll probably master it because I won't stop until I do. I can't stop. The desire to have “all the information” available is very strong in me. I need to know how things work, and I love rules & structure.

I work in HR & business consulting. Being someone who can appreciate and memorize all workplace “rules” and procedures, and my extreme dislike of being told what to do (PDA), have led me to office leadership. Also, because I learn topics so deeply, in many cases I enjoy being the person who teaches/trains others within my department.

Now, with my love of all things Neurodiversity—I’m turning that love of knowledge and teaching into something much bigger.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

When I worked in an open office with florescent lighting, my neurological health started to decline, triggering frequent migraines and painful sensory overloads. Now, in my new role with AAG, I work remotely most of the time so that I am rested and can handle intense sensory situations when they do come up. When I DO have to go into situations that are hostile to my senses, I wear sunglasses, hats, headphones, and earplugs as needed.

I also struggle with executive functioning and short-term memory. I depend on my visual schedule to keep me on track. All my tasks for work are placed on my calendar, and as the day goes by, I check them off one by one. It keeps me on track of MANY COMPLEX TASKS and makes sure I don’t forget anything. This is what confuses people the most—I can get MANY complex tasks done, but simple things trip me up sometimes. For example, I use a trick of moving around bottles in the shower to help me remember what step I’m on, because I can’t remember & lose track if I’ve shampooed or conditioned.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

I have been bullied by peers, teachers, and even people who were supposed to take care of me. I think the worst was when my teacher would tie my feet to my chair to keep them still or, when I tried to report bullying to the same teacher, she told me “if I acted normal the other kids would leave me alone.” I didn’t know what she meant/how they wanted me to act. I was being “normal” to me.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

“I know it’s hard, but find a way to STOP caring so much about what other people think.”

When we care too much about the opinions of others, we put our own needs second. It is a betrayal of self, and that can be devastating. In my life, I’ve struggled with anxiety and maintaining my mental health. I’ve watched the patterns as my anxiety has spiked, and my self-worth has gone down. My happiest moments are when I’m living authentically. My most miserable were when I let the demands and expectations of others crush me.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

Let’s start with what they need to ignore: Especially in VERY YOUNG CHILDREN, you need to ignore anything that starts with, “Your child may never...” Throw that out the window. It’s true, your autistic child may not be able to do some things that neurotypicals can as adults, or if they can do them it may require extreme amounts of effort, but don’t let shortcomings and missed expectations become all your child hears about. Remember you are trying to build a young person’s self-esteem.

Help your child focus on what they are good at and enjoy doing. Empower them, encourage them, and most importantly don’t give up on them. Remember, there’s not a “normal” kid hiding under the autism; your child is autistic—this is part of who they are, their experience, thinking style, and even their personality.

Start reading to your kids at a young age, running your fingers under the words as you read aloud. If your child is pre-speech or non-speaking, remember that doesn’t mean they cannot understand you.

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

Just learning about neurodiversity. I used to be VERY hard on myself for struggling, greatly sometimes, with things other people did easily. Now I know I'm autistic, and I can see how much my gifts are also tied into that as much as every struggle ever was. There is a duality, two sides of the same coin.

Then there is neurodiversity.

“I don't have to be good at everything, because other people in this world have the skills I lack and desire the skills I have. We can help each other. It's beautiful.”

How does living on the road fit in well with your neurodivergent traits and how you want to live?

Living in an RV has suited me as an autistic person for a few reasons.

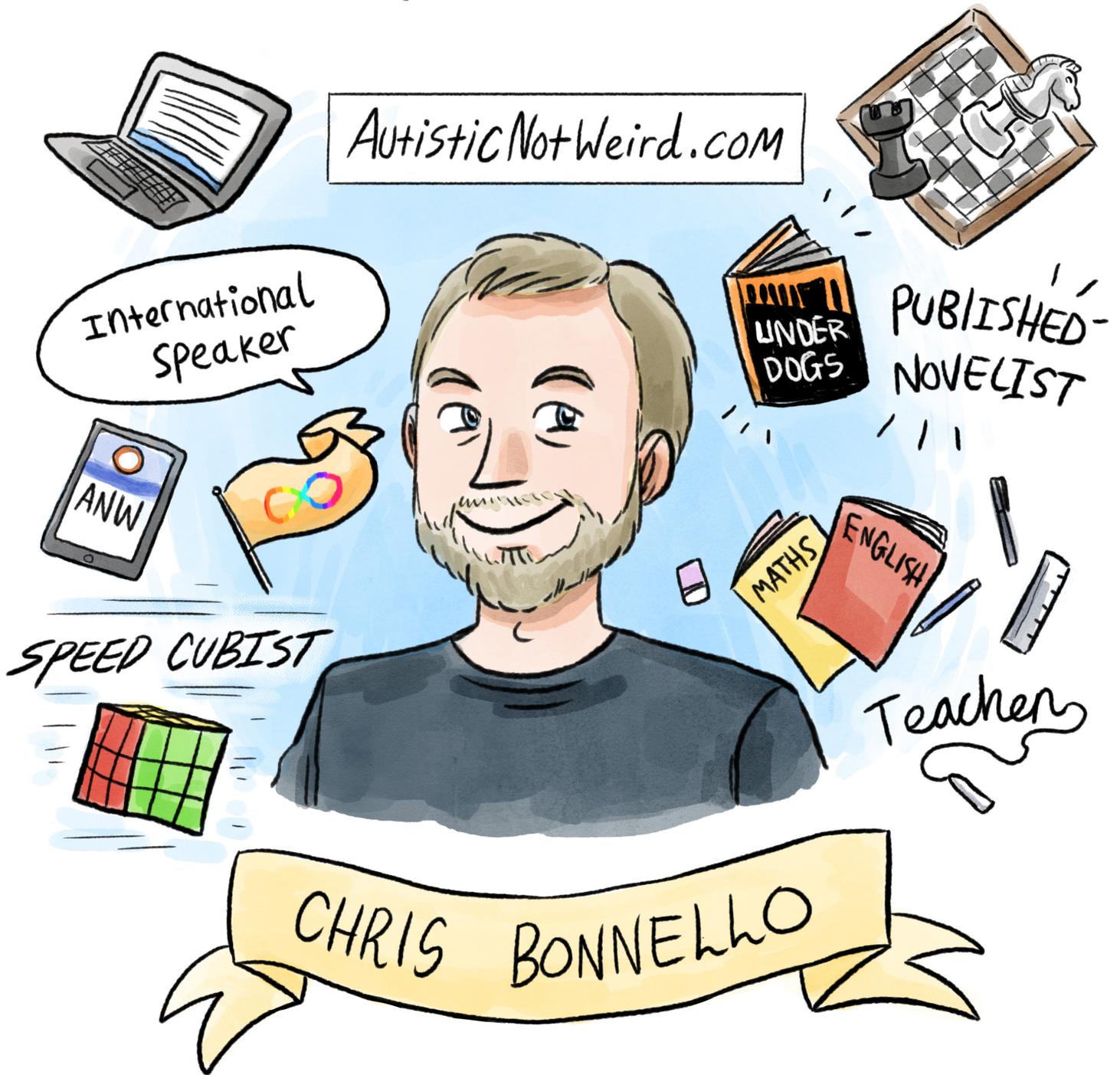
- Roaming sensory bubble with a private bathroom!
- Smaller space easier to keep clean/clean quickly.
- Reduced living costs.
- Traveling is fun and much easier when you take your home with you. No packing, no unpacking, you have everything you need on the bus. It's your house, ready to move.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

I'm everywhere! My website is probably the easiest because it has links to everything else.

- Website: <https://neurodivergentrebel.com/>
- Facebook: [Facebook.com/NeurodivergentRebel](https://www.facebook.com/NeurodivergentRebel)
- Twitter: [@NeuroRebel](https://twitter.com/NeuroRebel)
- Instagram: [@NeurodivergentRebel](https://www.instagram.com/NeurodivergentRebel)

"The only person who can decide who you are is You"



A Day in the Life...Chris Bonnello, Autistic Not Weird

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Chris Bonnello is an educator, writer, speaker, and advocate involved with children, adults, and society at large educating on autism-related topics. His experiences in education and writing have helped him connect with people and with creating his well-known Autistic Not Weird website and popular Facebook group. He is also the author of *Underdogs* (2019), a near-future dystopian novel with neurodiverse characters. Its sequel, *Underdogs: Tooth and Nail*, is in the works and should be published soon. Chris has learned more and more about himself as he navigates our tricky world, and he strives to live in a way that helps him make best use of his strengths and skills. He lives in the UK.

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you (or, if there isn't a typical day, describe one that is representative of your work/regular life)?

Half the time, my typical day involves tutoring at an independent school for autistic students. Being an autistic teacher of autistic students is amazing because we're starting from a position of common ground, even sharing similar senses of humour (and among other things, there's no pretentiousness or hint-dropping either)! The other half of the time, my typical day involves working from home, either answering messages from followers, writing for Autistic Not Weird, or working on the *Underdogs* series. Occasionally I drive across the country and deliver a speaking engagement, which is always fun.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

This is a surprisingly tricky question to answer, because most of my hobbies have turned into work! autism advocacy used to be a hobby but now it's one of my jobs (thanks largely to my Patreon supporters who enable me to do so part-time). Writing used to be a hobby too, but now being a novelist is another job for me—and thankfully it hasn't cost me any of the joy

I've always felt for it. I think the main two hobbies I have these days are chess and cubing. "Cubing" being speed-solving Rubik's cubes—I learned how to solve them back in August and they became my "autistic obsession," so now my current record is 19.16 seconds!

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

Being autistic in a school for autistic students means I'm often seen as the one who "just gets it," which I see as a huge compliment. This personal level of understanding—even if our life experiences differ—often means I find it easier to accommodate those who need it. And in special education, accommodation is everything. My autism does help me a bit with chess and cubing, but honestly I think that's more of a hyperfocus thing than any kind of intellect. You don't have to be massively intelligent to do either of those things well, despite the stereotypes!

Of course, there are disadvantages in all of this. My executive functioning leads to bad organisation, and my hyperfocus can even mean forgetting to eat!

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

I learned very early in my adulthood that I only succeed at the things that are done on my own terms. I've always struggled with job interviews, finding employment the "traditional" way, getting books published the traditional way (i.e., via a literary agent), and generally matching most people's social expectations too. The only way I was able to succeed at most tasks was by finding my own way of doing them. (Even the small things—for example, adapting my working hours to match my waking hours.)

"I've been very fortunate in finding people who are willing to accommodate me doing things differently, because they understand it helps me play to my strengths."

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

Who hasn't? I was bullied at secondary school—not specifically for being autistic since nobody knew what it was back then, but certainly for being “weird” and different. And whereas I wouldn't say I was literally discriminated against while looking for jobs as an adult, I was clearly the victim of a recruitment process that was designed with non-autistic people in mind.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey? I go into further details here, but my main advice for autistic young people is:

1. Whatever you're going through, you are not alone.
2. The only person who can decide who you are is you.
3. Sometimes your pace and methods will be different, and that's totally fine.
4. Once your school days are over, they're over forever.
5. Find the places where you can play to your strengths.
6. Don't blame yourself for things that aren't your fault.
7. If you need help, ask for it.
8. Everyone else finds things difficult too.
9. I'd rather be happy than normal.
10. Remember how much you're loved.
11. (Yes, this one goes up to 11.) Finally, listen to other people's advice.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

I'd say the main one is allowing your children to play to their strengths, even if those strengths are unusual or something they're unlikely to get a career in. When the world is telling you that you're different or even “faulty,” having something you know you're good at can do wonders for your self-esteem. In my worst days, my chess club was my weekly reminder that I wasn't crap at everything.

Besides that, pick and choose advice relating to autism. Autistic people are different from each other for the same reason non-autistic people are, so advice that applies to some autistic children may not apply to yours. You have to be massively intelligent to do either of those things well, despite the stereotypes!

Of course, there are disadvantages in all of this. My executive functioning leads to bad organisation, and my hyperfocus can even mean forgetting to eat!

“Oh, and if an “expert” tries to tell you that your nonverbal child doesn't feel empathy or isn't impacted by the words of those around them, tell them to bugger off.”

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

When I was fifteen, I was on a writers' forum talking to other teenagers about the difficulties of having to adapt ourselves to become popular (or just hated less) by classmates who were higher up the social hierarchy. In the midst of this discussion, the forum's moderator—a man in his fifties with experience on his side—simply asked us “...Would they change for you?”

That sentence stuck with me. It helped me to realise I shouldn't be swimming oceans to appease people who wouldn't cross a puddle for me.

Where did you come up with the idea for Underdogs?

Oddly enough, the first draft of Underdogs (“Guerrillas” at the time) was written as a coping mechanism for unemployment as a way of keeping myself busy. I didn't intend for it to get published—that wasn't the purpose of it as long as it helped to keep me happy. I suppose I wanted to write a challenge for myself—a story featuring the most unwinnable war possible (almost mathematically unwinnable). A few drafts later I was working in special education and came to realise that there was a huge gap in representation for neurodiverse heroes, especially

those attending special schools. The story then became more about the characters and their development than about the ins and outs of the war, which is kind of what I wanted all along.

What are some of the intangible rewards for your Autistic Not Weird online presence? What drove you to “quit your day job” and focus on this endeavor?

At first, running ANW helped me a lot because I knew I was doing something valuable—I had just left teaching “forever” so this was my way of continuing to help young people (and adults too), even if indirectly as a voice on the internet. Eventually it became so big that I had no hours left to spare, so I had to quit my job to give the community the time that it deserved—and thanks again to Patreon, I was able to afford it.

As time has gone by, ANW has helped me with my confidence and self-perception, to the extent that I want to go back in time to the 2013 me who told his therapist he was a failure, and wipe these achievements all over his face. Just because your life and career aren't going the way you planned in your mid-twenties, it doesn't mean that you can't become an award-winning writer, international speaker, and published novelist by your mid-30s. It's helped me to realise that I was worth more than I thought all along—even back in my worst days, there was value to who I was and what I could do, even if I didn't recognise it at the time.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- Email: autisticnotweird@hotmail.com
- Main site: autisticnotweird.com
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/autisticnotweird
- Twitter: [@AutisticNW](https://twitter.com/AutisticNW)
- Instagram: [@autisticnotweird](https://www.instagram.com/autisticnotweird)
- Patreon (for perks and rewards): www.patreon.com/autisticnotweird
- And Underdogs on Facebook: www.facebook.com/Underdogsnovel

"Nurture and encourage those special interests, talents and passions"



A Day in the Life...Haley Moss, Lawyer, Author, Artist

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Haley Moss was diagnosed as autistic when she was a small child, but she grew up with the love and support of her family who focused on her strengths and treated any difference as an asset. She grew up knowing that she could do anything she set her mind to. She kept that thought with her as she wrote books, established her own style of art, and went to college, earning two undergraduate degrees and graduating from law school in 2018, passing the bar exam soon thereafter. Her cheerful art and helpful books have provided guidance to autistic kids, teens, and young adults. After practicing law for a time, she now has her own business as a public speaker and consultant. She was featured on [The Today Show](#) profiling her and her journey.

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you (or, if there isn't a typical day, describe one that is representative of your work/regular life)?

So... my days are very varied right now, especially with traveling for speaking engagements and the like! A travel day looks similar in most instances: wake up unusually early (sometimes about 4AM), get dressed, have a light snack, make sure everything is packed and my apartment is okay to be without me for a few days, go to the airport, feel stressed about security screening, decompress a bit with noise-cancelling headphones, sleep on the plane if possible, get hyped up to present and meet people, check into hotels, present (if it's same day, if not, it'll be the next morning more than likely).

On days I'm home, I try to follow a schedule of sorts of when I wake up and eat. I also try to set aside a goal for the day—sometimes it's writing an article or working on what hopefully will be my next book, or a contract, or making phone calls or responding to certain inquiries and things. I wear a lot of different hats each day, so no two days are the same, which is cool!

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

Outside of the law and autism advocacy, things I enjoy doing are drawing and painting, playing video games, reading books, taking cycling and Pilates classes, and finally catching up on my Netflix queue.

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

I can hyper-focus on things that interest me and dedicate my time and energy into doing what I love really, really well.

Conversely, I can hyper-focus on things that interest me and then executive functioning becomes a bit of a mountain to climb for other things, or I don't know exactly what to prioritize first. I make a lot of lists and use a lot of calendars.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

Each day is different. Since I am currently in my own business, I am the one in charge, so self-accommodation is a blessing. If I'm having a difficult executive functioning day, I'm not too hard on myself and I make lists before going back to tasks. Sometimes I respond to inquiries and emails well after business hours because I can focus without repeated responses and other tasks to keep track of. Calendars save my life. As do breaks, walks, and no fluorescent lighting (definitely a perk of being outside of an office setting for the time being).

My parents help me a lot with things like keeping my living space clean or staying organized. I am blessed to realize independence doesn't mean "do it all yourself," but have support and recognizing interdependence is okay, and sometimes you need help to have the freedom to live life on your terms, too.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

I've experienced a lot of what I call "benevolent ableism"—a type of discrimination that's disguised as being kind and caring and is subtle exclusion. It's not

being invited to events because people are thoughtfully (though misguidedly) saying, “You might not be able to handle the sensory input.” I’m fully capable of making those decisions myself and denying me access is a form of discrimination and bullying.

I’ve also had people talk down to me as if I can’t understand things. I am the same person I was before we talked about autism or you knew I was autistic. I am very capable of understanding things and will let you know if I don’t.

I’ve also had doubt of the merits of how I’ve gotten to where I am in life. I took the same bar exam, graduated college, took the same classes in high school, etc., as my nondisabled peers. I just had to work harder and through ableism as well as my own challenges at the same time to get through the same rites of passage or milestones.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

Listen to your kids! We all have talents and things we are passionate about. Nurture and encourage those special interests, talents, and passions. You never know what they will bring, and they are also essential to our happiness and personhood.

“Also, listen to autistic adults—we are the everyday experts. We have that lived experience. Befriend us too. It sends a strong message to your children that autistic adults exist, can have meaningful lives and friendships, and that your kids aren’t the only ones who are autistic. Not feeling alone is super important for everyone.”

So, I guess as far as advice to ignore—trust yourself! You are your child’s biggest advocate, especially when they are young or have higher support needs (in time, they can become their own best and biggest advocate). You know your kid really, really well. You know what works best for your family.

What was one piece of advice you received that helped you be comfortable with who you are?

Beginning with when I was 9 and first learned I was autistic, my mom always said, “Different isn’t bad. It’s just different. And different can be extraordinary.” It really helped me feel confident and comfortable in my very wonderfully autistic self in such a way that I wouldn’t trade being autistic.

What drove you to go into law? What kinds of law do you plan to practice?

Originally, I went to college thinking I would go to medical school and become a psychiatrist. I thought nothing would be cooler than understanding the mind and being able to help other autistic people in that respect. However, the sciences didn’t jive with me or make me happy.

So, when I thought about what makes me happy or what I wanted to do when I grew up, I focused on my strengths. I love to write, and love to talk, and also want to help people. Lawyers are strong writers and advocates with the potential to make a difference in peoples’ lives every single day.

In my previous job, I practiced in healthcare and international law. I mostly worked on anti-terrorism litigation. It was really cool stuff.

Currently, I just started my own business! I am a public speaker and also a consultant on disability inclusion and neurodiversity in the workplace for other businesses and law firms. It’s a change for sure and I am having fun with it!

If/when I do go back to the law, I’d like to learn and practice in employment law.

What kind of response have you received for the books you've written?

The best is when young people are able to relate to experiences I have or felt I was able to help them. I am so grateful to have had those reactions over the years.

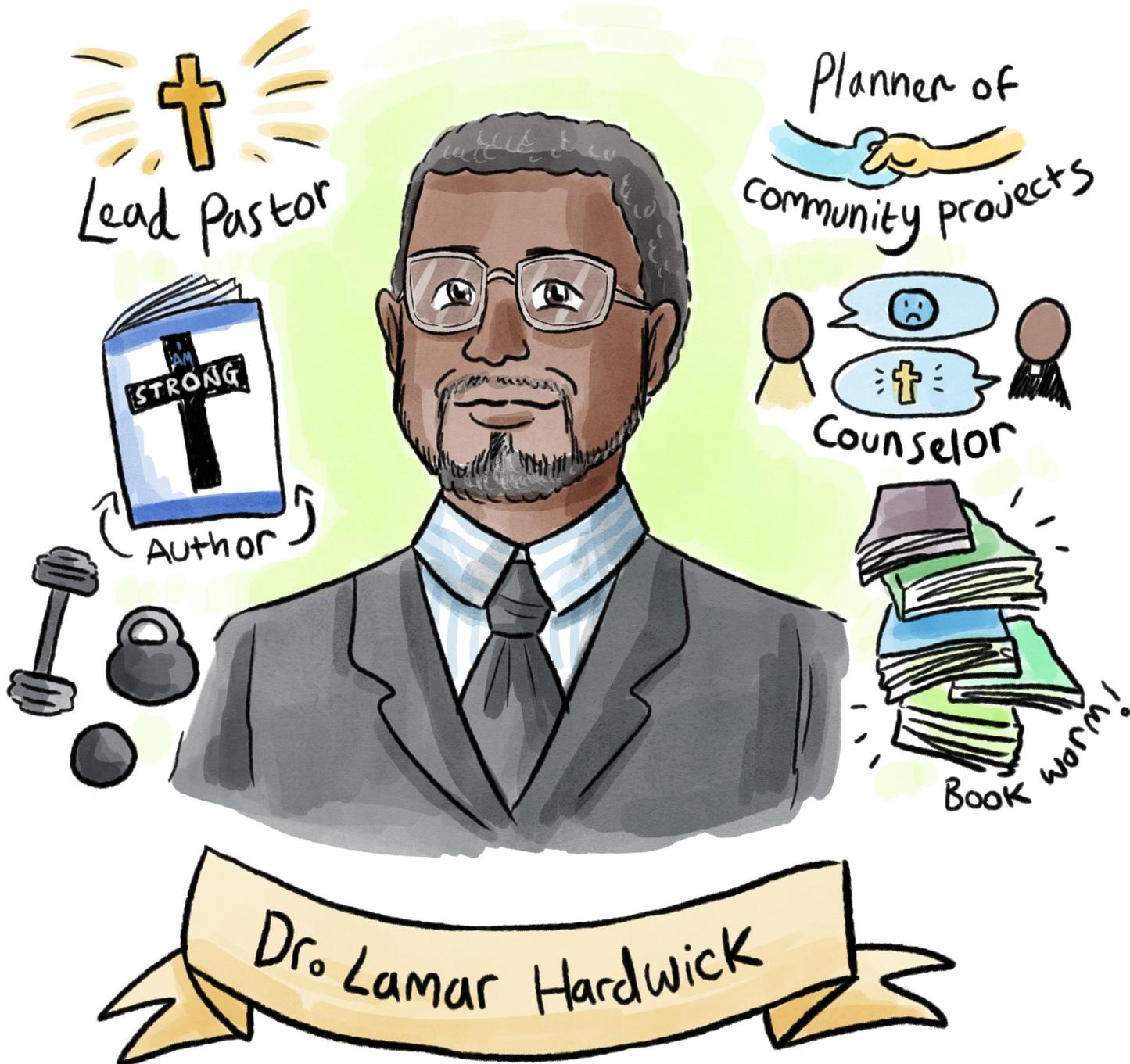
What inspires you in your art?

Everything, really. Especially things with bright colors or that I notice bring others a lot of joy.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- Twitter: [@haleymossart](https://twitter.com/haleymossart)
- Facebook: facebook.com/haleymossart
- Instagram: [@haley.moss](https://instagram.com/haley.moss)
- Email: haley@haleymoss.net

"If given the right support, there are many things that can be accomplished."



A Day in the Life... Dr. Lamar Hardwick, Pastor, Family Man

INTERVIEW BY JENNY BRISTOL

Illustration by Rebecca Burgess

Dr. Lamar Hardwick is a leader in his community, both in his role as lead pastor at Tri-Cities Church in Georgia and by being a positive force in the other parts of his life. He is very open about being autistic, for the purposes of educating others and for communicating his own needs. He has learned in which types of environments he thrives best, and has set up his life in such a way to make best use of his many strengths. Dr. Hardwick has written a book about his experience entitled [I Am Strong: The Life and Journey of an Autistic Pastor](#). You can also read Dr. Hardwick's interview with [GCB's Zoom Magazine in Issue 10](#).

What does a typical work/regular day look like for you (or, if there isn't a typical day, describe one that is representative of your work/regular life)?

A typical day for me is usually filled with meetings, phone calls, or emails. Most of the time I am meeting with people with whom I am working on a project or people who come to me for spiritual counsel. I also spend quite a bit of time meeting with my staff and planning church or community events.

What hobbies or interests do you have outside of your work?

I love to read. I am usually reading anywhere between 3 to 5 books a month. I also love to watch movies, so I tend to go to the movies alone a lot. It gives me a chance to unplug and process my thoughts as I watch the characters on the screen. I also love to exercise. I do cross fit classes 4-5 times a week. It helps me with my stress and anxiety.

How does being autistic help or hinder your work or hobbies?

Well, it definitely helps in being able to keep a routine. I love to have all of my hobbies to fit into a set schedule or rotation. On the other hand, things like joining a new gym was difficult because I had to meet new

people and interact with them in a strange environment. Eventually I adjusted, but the first several months were anxiety provoking.

What kinds of changes or accommodations do you make in your life to allow you to be successful?

I have to modify my schedule to fit my peak performance times. I don't keep a typical schedule. I only schedule meetings between certain activities. I work from home two days a week because I need the time to be alone and work without distractions. I also spend a limited amount of time in my actual office. I usually only work in my office for a maximum of 3 hours. I am fortunate to be able to have complete control of my work schedule.

Have you experienced discrimination or bullying because of your autism or autistic traits?

I have experienced it from time to time, but for the most part people treat me fairly. I am very open about my diagnosis and I communicate to the people around me how to work with me and how they can help me to be my best. In the cases that I have had bad experiences, it has been something that I was able to address directly. Sometimes people's ignorance about autism leads to discrimination. I continue to see my role as a teacher and educator about autism so that we can teach people not to discriminate.

What advice would you give to a young or teenage autistic person to help them live their best life, or what advice would you give an autistic adult to help them feel supported in their continuing journey?

I often remind young adults on the spectrum that there is always at least one thing that they can do that the people around them can't do. Standing out isn't always a bad thing. Once you know what is unique about your style, personality, and your perspective about life then you can actually be a trail blazer. Sometimes in order to make a difference we have to be willing to be different. Different doesn't mean deficient.

What advice would you give parents of autistic kids about the best ways to support their kids in becoming their best selves? What advice from the “experts” do you think parents should ignore?

Every child has potential and the best way to support them is to ignore what others are doing and help them to find their greatest potential, whatever that looks like for them. Don't measure success by measuring them up against other children's achievements. Also learn to celebrate their progress more regularly. Building their confidence is important.

How has being diagnosed helped you communicate and interact with your family, your parishioners, and others? In what ways has understanding yourself better been a boon?

Being diagnosed has helped me to teach my family, friends, and parishioners how to interact with me, how to support me, and how to help me achieve my highest potential.

“Understanding myself has helped me to focus on getting better at my natural skills and gifts instead of spending time trying to become a person that I was never meant to be.”

What messages do you hope the public will take away from seeing you thrive and succeed in your life?

That success is often more a matter of having the right environment and the right support than it is living up to a superficial standard. If given the right support, there are many things that can be accomplished.

What do you see as some of the potential strengths of being autistic?

My attention to detail. My ability to understand patterns and make realistic predictions about what to expect. My ability to focus on tasks and complete them on time. My ability to absorb large amounts of written information and to communicate ideas.

What are the best ways for people to connect with you?

- Facebook: autism Pastor – www.facebook.com/autismpastor
- Instagram: [@lamarhardwick](https://www.instagram.com/lamarhardwick)
- Twitter: [@autismpastor](https://twitter.com/autismpastor)

Realize that we are a part of the same society that you are.

We are around you every day. We work with you, we are your customers, we are your service people, we are your teachers, lawyers, and peers. We are not “other;” we are just like you in so many ways, with our own sets of skills, talents, and challenges. We've learned to advocate for ourselves and for each other.

Learn about autism through autistic life experiences.

We hope this series will be a resource for those who want to learn more about autism directly from autistic adults themselves, those who have the words to express their needs and experiences.

You'll learn what has helped us and what has hindered us. What has been necessary for growth and what held us back. And you'll learn how to be more supportive of autistic children and adults, both those you already know and those you have yet to meet.