

# Autism in the Workforce

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Honors Thesis

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## **Abstract**

Individuals with Autism have tremendous challenges set out for them. Throughout their lives these individuals are told that they cannot succeed. They cannot achieve. Growing up with this mentality, these individuals enter adulthood without an outlet to give back to society. They are unable to find employment due to trepidations and misunderstandings of this disability brought on by a misleading and dangerous medical diagnosis. Unfortunately, this leads to them fading away within the crowd. They become a forgotten statistic amongst their generation. It is time for this ongoing trend to change. In this paper, the challenges and underlying factors of Autism brought on by the outlook of society are thoroughly examined. Moreover, the consequences of the resulting implications for society are similarly brought to light. This paper shows that the untapped capabilities and skills of these individuals are absolutely tremendous if and only if they are given a proper chance within society. Several organizations have begun to take charge and lead the way towards helping these individuals make a difference. It is now time for the rest of society to follow suit.

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## **I: Introduction**

Imagine, if you will, the following scenario:

You have just crash landed in a foreign country of unknown origin. Worse yet, you have no idea where the other passengers on the plane are. You are alone. However, all is not lost. Just across the nearby ridge you can make out the faint outline of a village. As you stumble to the village gates you rejoice as you see another person. Immediately, you try to communicate with the individual, but you do not speak his language. Desperate, you are reduced to erratic gestures and signs to communicate your needs. In this, you are met with minimal success. Across the village, you experience the same reality with nearly every individual you meet. Needless to say, you become exceedingly frustrated. You want to communicate with people, but you lack the facilities to do so.

Eventually, after tireless hours of this same repeated process, you finally meet someone who understands and sympathizes with your plight. In an attempt to help you, he seeks out and provides you with a dictionary that translates individual words from his language into yours and vice versa. What a boon!! At last you have a means of communication! However, you still have a problem. When trying to communicate using this resource, you have to look up each and every word that you want to say in isolation. Not only that, but you then have to pause to consider how the words you have looked up should be strung together to form a meaningful sentence. Needless to say, this takes an excessive amount of time, and still makes communication very difficult. More often than not, villagers are too

busy to stop and give you the necessary time that you need to be able to communicate, and even for those that do, you are very prone to misinterpretation.

As the days pass, you become more and more overwhelmed. Waves of emotions that you cannot readily identify tackle you each day as you become increasingly frustrated. Not only is communication extremely difficult, but that handy little lifeline you were so graciously given makes no mention of the customs and culture of the people you are surrounded with each day...which leads you into trouble more often than you would like. Distrust grows between yourself and the surrounding villagers. More than this, constant ignoring and increasing agitation by less patient villagers has caused you to become very withdrawn. You have learned to communicate as little as possible and your self-image has degraded immensely. Most villagers look down on you, and the few who do show you some sympathy treat you like a broken individual.

This is just a brief glimpse of how it feels to be a person diagnosed with Autism in today's society. Luckily, you can leave this imagined world unscathed. Individuals with Autism are not as fortunate.

This story does not have to end here, however, and it certainly does not have to play out this way. What if when you arrived to the village, one of the inhabitants had taken the time to sit down with and help you to understand how life in the village worked – their language, customs, and general way of life? What if the inhabitant had taken you in just the way you were, noticed that you were really a very intelligent person from the creative ways in which you tried to communicate, and worked with you so that you

would be able to channel and utilize that intelligence in his setting? Now is your chance to find out as we venture towards understanding what Autism really is, and how these individuals can thrive within a society that gives them a proper chance.

## **II: The Current State of Autism**

### **What is Autism: A Medical Dilemma**

Before we can look towards the future of Autism, we must take a brief glance at the present diagnosis to see how Autism has been defined by society. In Exceptional Lives: Special Education in Today's Schools, Ann and Rud Turnbull, along with Michael L. Wehmeyer (2010) open their chapter on Autism in the following manner:

“Autism is a developmental disability that significantly affects a student’s verbal and nonverbal communication, social interaction, and educational performance. It generally occurs before a child reaches age 3; typically the child engages in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resists environmental change or changes in daily routines, and displays unusual responses to sensory experiences.”  
(p. 302)

Turnbull, Turnbull, and Wehmeyer (2010) then continue by discussing different forms of Autism, characteristics, possible causes, and strategies for working in the classroom, but this, perhaps, is the best place to stop for now. As anyone who has worked with individuals with Autism can relate, you simply cannot sum up all of what Autism is in a short paragraph, chapter, or even a book for that matter. Though individuals with Autism share common traits, each and every person with Autism is completely different, just as much as you, the reader, are different from the person sitting across from you at this very moment. Every person comes to the table with different stories, different experiences that make them who they are today. This idea, though simple in form, must be understood before any further progress can be made. Individuals with Autism are just



that; individuals who have been diagnosed with a disorder called Autism. They must be viewed as people before any mention of a disability can be brought forward. Now, this may sound somewhat “touchy-feely” and almost ridiculous, but as we will see, when attempts are made to generalize this disorder, “blanket it” if you will, problems arise.

For this, there is no better place to start than the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders edition four (DSM-IV). In an attempt to scientifically document and describe this disorder, leading psychologists have placed together a diagnosis of Autism based on a list of observable behaviors common to individuals with Autism and centering on the three specific areas: impairments in social interaction, weaknesses in communication, and repetitive behavior patterns and activities. Now, this is not to say that all individuals with Autism exhibit all of these behaviors all of the time. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Individuals must only display at least six of the behaviors listed in the manual to fall on what is known as the Autism Spectrum. This spectrum encompasses a very wide range of individuals and is commonly categorized under many other different labels such as Asperger’s, Retts Syndrome, and PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified). All of these labels, however, lead back to the same exact umbrella disorder, Autism. Examples of the behaviors included in the DSM-IV’s diagnosis include: delays in the development of verbal language, inability to start or continue conversations with other people, repetitive language, rigidity with respect to breaking from scheduled routines, out of place repetitive motions, lack of imaginative play as a child, impairments in nonverbal communication, and the overall inability to make and retain friends. (American Psych Association, 2000)

So basically, according to the DSM-IV, a person with Autism is someone who is rather slow socially. He may take a long time to respond to individuals and may repeat himself often. In addition, he may have difficulty connecting to people, establishing lasting relationships, and holding a conversation. He also may act in ways that, at times, seem awkward to the “normal person” such as making repetitive movements, gazing off into space, or severely “tunneling” focus. Finally, he may really like structure and get frustrated when structure is taken away.

Something very striking to notice is the language used when describing this disorder. Take a minute and look back at the DSM-IV language and the translated version beneath. What notable differences do you see? In the first paragraph, each behavior is described using a set of words synonymous with the word “disability.” Inability, lack, impairment, weakness, etc. – each and every one of these terms is negative in nature, whereas the second says nearly the same thing without these undertones. Why is this? Perhaps this language comes through out of necessity. After all, when attempting to identify an individual who is different from the “normal person” in a scientific manner the most common thought is to seek out deficiencies from the norm. What can a “normal person” do that this person cannot, or more bluntly what is wrong with this person? Now, the logic behind this thinking is actually quite simple and sounds benevolent on the surface. Once it is determined what is “wrong” with the person, steps can then be taken to “cure” or “fix” the individual in the same way that a hole is filled in with sand, or a broken toy is mended.

There is a flaw in this thinking, though. A serious problem with this philosophy is that it approaches the person in question as a “broken” individual that needs “fixing”

from square one. Now remember, not all individuals with Autism exhibit the same characteristics. Yet, this point of view constantly requires the observer to actively seek out these negative aspects of the given individual in question, and little attention is given to what the individual actually can do. Instead, the observer is forced to try and point out differences from the “norm.” Now, from this perspective, the observer begins to form “reasonable expectations” of what the individual cannot do. This, in itself is very damaging.

In his article, “Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education,” author Ray C. Rist (2000) offers insight into how expectations work to transform the reality of a given individual through a self-fulfilling prophecy. A self-fulfilling prophecy is the occurrence in which a person in authority sets a certain bar for an individual to meet. The idea is that once this bar is set, the individual will rise to the expectations set down for them, and this can be either positive or negative. If the bar is set high, the individual will have a chance to rise to the high expectations. Inversely, if the bar is set low, the individual will rise to the lower expectations but will seldom cross that threshold. In his article, Rist (2000), conducted a study that today might be considered highly controversial. In this study he tracked the performance of a group of students from Kindergarten up to Second Grade. It is not mentioned whether or not any of these students has any form of disability, so the common assumption is that these students comprised a sampling of the “normal” population. In the beginning of the students’ Kindergarten year, the teacher evaluated the students based on how successful she believed they would be based on: parent interviews, previous siblings, registration forms, and input from fellow colleagues. From this non-academic data, the teacher

placed the students into groups accordingly with “believed high achievers” placed at one table, “believed low achievers” at another, etc. During observations taken throughout the year, it became readily apparent that the teacher and the students began treating each other differently depending upon which table they were placed. Perhaps it was subconscious, but throughout the year, “high achievers” received more academic attention and more praise from the teacher, while the “low achievers” had more discipline and less academic attention. Needless to say, at the end of the year, definite lines had been drawn. “High achievers” got higher, and “low achievers” got lower. What is really interesting, however, is what happened in the next grade. Receiving the evaluations from the Kindergarten teacher, the first grade teacher placed the students at tables yet again according to “ability.” Not surprising, students who were not at the “high achieving” table in Kindergarten did not ascend to the “high achieving” table in first grade. In fact, some students at the “middle table” actually dropped down to the “low table.” At the end of the year, results were similar. In fact, the gap widened. More shockingly, however, was the observance that students at the lower tables began to resent school altogether. It leaves little wonder that in the following year, the gap widened even farther with the low achievers who were by then without a shadow of a doubt low achievers, getting lower, and the high achievers getting higher. More importantly, the self-image each student had of himself/herself directly reflected their achievement level. (Rist, 2000)

Of course, it can be argued from the above study that the first teacher had viable reason for the placements she made, and students logically would reflect those placements throughout the years. The same cannot be said, however, for the next study. In an attempt to demonstrate the impacts of racism to her class of students, Jane Elliot

(2003) undertook a groundbreaking experiment in her 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class. The premise was simple. One day, Elliot came into class and told her students that it was recently discovered that brown eyed students were dirtier, less capable of achieving, and less likely to succeed later in life than blue eyed students. Similarly, she gave a host of reasons why blue eyed people were superior to brown eyed people. This was reinforced by statements made throughout the day that continually pointed out these differences in a very cold manner. What she found as a result was remarkable. Over a short period of time, Elliot began to notice distinct differences between her blue eyed and brown eyed students. Across the board in all subjects, Elliot's brown eyed students began to achieve at a much lower level than they had previously, regardless of prior achievement levels. Not only this, but their self-image plunged dramatically. The brown-eyed students, believing what they were told began to act according to their diagnosis. Similarly, the blue eyed students began to achieve at a much higher level, and their self-image greatly increased. This was allowed to go on for a day. The next day, Elliot reversed the diagnosis on her students. She told them that she was mistaken. It really was the blue-eyed students who were the dirty, unkempt, underachievers, and the brown eyed students who were superior. Interestingly enough, the students flip-flopped. Almost immediately, the brown-eyed students began achieving at a higher rate, and the blue-eyed students at a lower rate; with self-images to match. Elliot then ran this experiment many more times in future third grade classes, and later in a slightly modified form with an adult population and got shockingly similar results. From this, we can see that observer outlook truly does matter when expectations are set, and the effects of such an outlook, be it controlled or by chance, transpose themselves onto the individual in question.

Take this back now to the diagnosis of Autism. When observers are asked to persistently look for a problem, something wrong with the person, it is very reasonable to say that the overall perception of the person will be much lower, and thus the bar of expectations will follow suit. This way of thinking, once begun, unfortunately does not stop in the closed environment of the lab. This cascades down to the individual with Autism as well and results in a low self-image which, as has been shown, cuts overall ability drastically. In addition, as we will now see, it begins to permeate all aspects of society, and leads to misconceptions and misrepresentations of what an individual with Autism is truly capable of accomplishing.

### **Autism in the News**

Medical prognosis has a large effect on how society views Autism. One needs to look no farther than this past December to see how damaging it can be. The shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, were a tremendous tragedy for all involved. This statement needs no clarification or further discussion. What many do not realize, however, is that the shootings were a tremendous tragedy for the Autism community as well. Soon after the shootings, articles began rearing their heads with “breaking news” about Adam Larza. Blogs with titles such as “Newtown killer had Autism, sociopathy....the 'signs' were there but nobody acted,” (Will, 2012) began to appear. Now, anybody who actually knows somebody with Autism would know that Larza’s disorder had absolutely nothing to do with the tragedy that ensued. However for people that do not have knowledge of Autism the story is different. Incidents like this lead to questions; questions that when researched with a medical prognosis lead to severe misconceptions. People see that individuals with

Autism can have trouble making friends, can have difficulty processing emotions, can get frustrated with a lack of structure, etc. They begin taking the negative aspects of a generalized prognosis and use them to validate their own false conclusions. Pretty soon to them, every individual with Autism becomes someone capable of shooting up a public facility.

The reasons for this boil down to two ideas in the field of psychology known as biased assimilation and the representativeness heuristic. Put simply, with biased assimilation, people only tend to take in information that is consistent in which they already believe. Thus, when they are predisposed toward an idea with articles and blogs such as the one mentioned above, they only take in information that meshes with that idea, leading to deeper, albeit at times false, conclusions. In the case of the second term, the representativeness heuristic, people see something about a person or an event and proceed to make judgments in the future regardless of all other information. In other words, people remember what they see or hear about a distinct event or group of people and apply it to future situations that do not necessarily apply at all. So, in this case, a person who happened to have Autism decides to enter a school armed to the teeth, and suddenly every person with Autism is capable of this as a result.

### **Autism in Other Media**

Luckily, not all forms of media portray Autism in a negative light to match the medical prognosis. Specifically, in the last decade, Hollywood and more recently the video game industry have begun stepping up to portray Autism in a more representative

and positive light. Two very recent movies that deserve honorable mention here are Dear John (2006) and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2011).

Based on the 2006 New York Times best seller of the same name, Dear John is a romance set in modern times in which John Tyree, on leave from the army, meets college student Savannah Curtis during spring break and falls in love. Over the course of his time there, he meets Savannah's neighbor, Tim Wheddon, and his son, Alan, who is diagnosed with Autism. Savannah, after meeting John's father, who is obsessed with coin collecting, suggests that his father might also have Asperger's based on her experience with Alan. As spring break comes to a close, John and Savannah part ways, but agree to keep in contact through letters and their relationship continues to blossom. These plans are upset, however, when John, after the events of 9/11, re-enlists in the army, and Savannah marries her neighbor, Tim. John returns years later to find that his father is in critical condition in the hospital after suffering from a stroke. John reconnects with his father who then dies shortly afterwards. John briefly reunites with Savannah again, and finds that Tim is also in the hospital with lymphoma, which put a halt to her dreams of opening a horse farm for kids with Autism. The film then skips ahead to years later. Tim has died, and John has finally left the military. Upon entering a coffee shop, he locks eyes with Savannah, and the movie ends with the pair embracing one another. (Bowen & Halstrom, 2010)

As was mentioned in the brief synopsis, there are two roles in this film in which Autism is portrayed. The first is John's father, Mr. Tyree, performed by Richard Jenkins. Jenkins portrays this role beautifully. Although eccentric, Mr. Tyree is just another person in the world. Unless you specifically took the time to psychoanalyze him, you



would never know that he has Asperger's. Like a good portion of the Autism community, Jenkins portrays Tyree as just another law abiding citizen who, though perhaps a bit quirky, is defined as an individual, not as a condition. (Halstrom, 2010)

The second role of Alan is portrayed by young Braeden Reed. The wonderful thing about Braeden is that he is actually diagnosed with Autism. Reed's performance in this box-office hit is perhaps described best by Executive Director of CarolinaAutism.org, Phil Blevins, in his email reply to the blog "Rethinking Autism." (2011) In his email, Blevins states:

"When the casting agent contacted me he said that he had been told it would be easier to hire a child who did not have Autism and have me coach him to act like he did have Autism. I immediately told him that I would rather introduce him to someone with Autism. I referenced movies like "Mercury Rising" and "House of Cards" as examples of movies in which a child tried to mimic Autism. I let him know that many people found those performances lacking in authenticity - bordering on offensive. I don't think that a child trying to imitate Autism would be able to show us that Autism and at the same time show joy. Braeden was joyful and it showed on the screen as I hoped it would...and his joy rubbed off on the filmmakers. My favorite example: The livestock coordinator, Dan Hydrick, was assigned to "assess" whether Braeden could do the horse scene. They had already hired a double for the actual riding parts, they just wondered if Braeden could sit on the horse long enough for a closeup. Dan met us at a riding stable and right away told me, "Look, no offense but I work for the movie. I don't give riding lessons and frankly I don't think Braeden should go near

a horse. But they asked me to see if he can at least sit still on one." Braeden had never been near a horse. In the movie there was supposed to be a scene in which Alan rode with his hands in the air. They planned to shoot it from behind so you couldn't tell it wasn't Braeden. Right there at the stable we all watched as Braeden lived the scene, holding Honey's muzzle and staring into her eyes, tuning all the adults around him out. I still cry (even as I type this) when I remember Braeden riding with his hands in the air at the stables and Dan taking digital photos to bring back to Lasse to ask for Braeden to do all the shots himself, no stunt double. Later Dan told me "That boy changed my life." (Rethinking Autism, 2011)

As you can see, young Reed's performance impacted not only theater goers, but the entire production team of the film. Dear John was a box-office smash coming in at over \$35 million in its opening weekend alone, and over \$80 million across its entire run in the United States. (N.A, 2010) This does not include the figures for the following DVD release. Millions of lives were touched by this film on and off camera, much like in the second film Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.

Appearing in theaters a year after Dear John, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is also based on a book of the same name published in 2005. This movie centers around a young boy with Autism whose father is killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. Oskar is incredibly close to his father and is absolutely devastated by the news that his father has died. A year after the events, Oskar still has not been able to fully cope with his loss, but he finds in his father's closet a key inside of an envelope with the single word "Black" written on it. As Oskar and his father used to play scavenger hunts to find objects around New York City in an attempt to build Oskar's communication

skills, Oskar uses this key as an attempt to find closure for his father's death. He makes it his goal to find the lock that the key fits. Looking up 472 Blacks in the New York City phone book, he begins his search by planning to visit each and every one. Along the way, Oskar comes across a strange man who recently moved in with his grandmother. The man, traumatized from a young age, only communicates via written notes and "yes"/"no" messages written on his hands. Oskar befriends the man, and together they begin to search for the secret of the key. Oskar eventually identifies this man to be his grandfather, and together with his newfound friend and relative, Oscar traverses the city – facing many of his personal fears such as public transit and bridges along the way. Eventually, Oskar's searches pay off when he finds William Black, the man who sold the vase that Oskar originally found the key in to his father. Oskar finds that the key fits a safety deposit box of William's father. Discouraged that the key really had nothing to do with Oskar or his dad after all, Oskar returns home extremely angry and upset. After he returns home, however, his mother tells him that she found out that he was searching for all the Blacks early on, and met with all of them in advance to let them know who he was and why he was coming so that they might treat him kindly. The movie ends with Oskar writing a letter to all of the Blacks that he came in contact with over the course of his adventure. He states that though he was disappointed that the key was not meant for him, he is glad that it finally wound up where it needed to be. Furthermore, he states that he has come to terms with the fact that his dad is never coming back and that he has realized that he actually can live without him – though he used to think he never could. He thinks that this would make his dad proud, which is all he ever wanted. (Daldry, 2011)

This movie is different from Dear John in that instead of side characters, the main character in this movie was the one diagnosed with Autism. The part of Oskar is portrayed with astounding realism by Thomas Horn. Throughout the movie, Oskar's social difficulties, sensory issues, and irregular rhythms of speech are brought to the forefront for the viewer. Apart from his slight social awkwardness, however, the audience is shown that Oskar is really a great kid. What's more is that the viewer is able to see just how Oskar is able to blossom when he is shown the kindness and consideration of the many people he comes in contact with. Throughout the movie, viewers witness a transformation brought on by people taking the time to treat Oskar as an individual as opposed to a stereotype. (Daldry, 2011)

These are just two of the larger films that have touched audiences over the past ten years concerning Autism, but there have been many more. While it would be impractical to flesh all of these films here, some others that have also portrayed Autism in a positive and realistic light include: Temple Grandin (2010), Adam (2009), God's Ears (2008), Snow Cake (2006), Mozart and the Whale (2005), Miracle Run (2004), and Radio (2003).

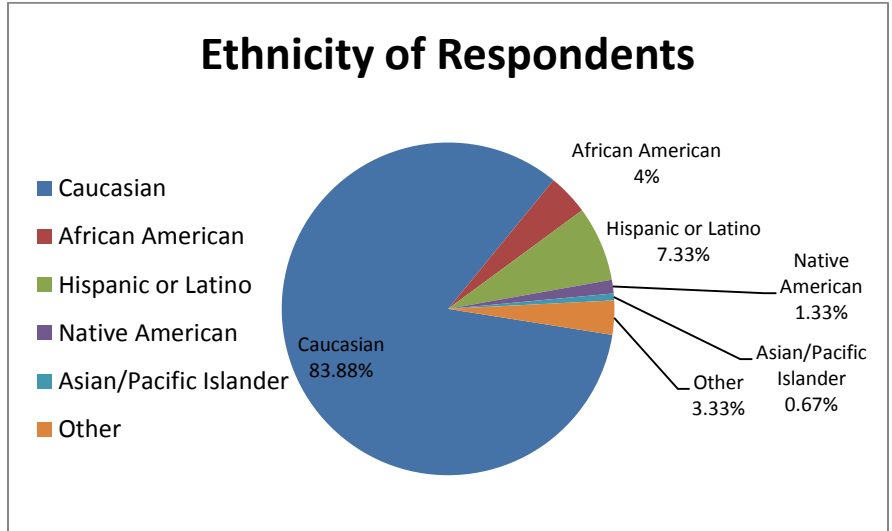
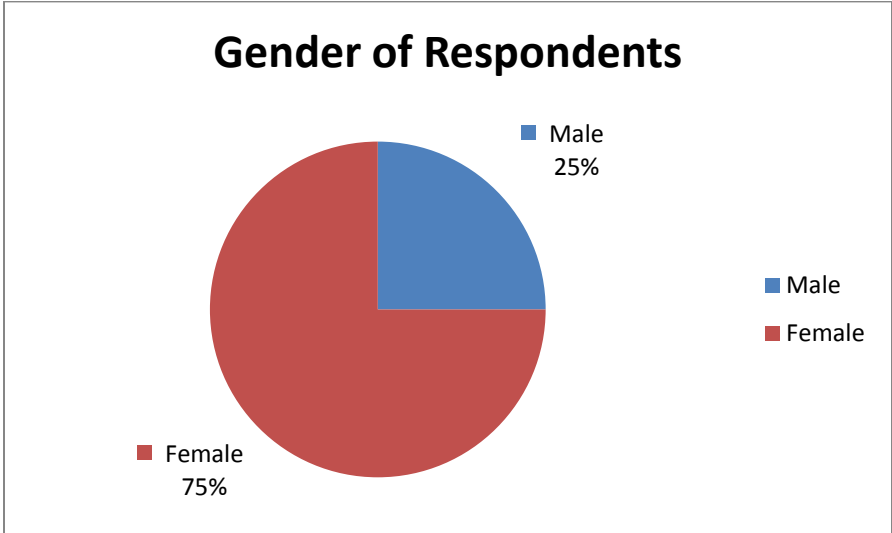
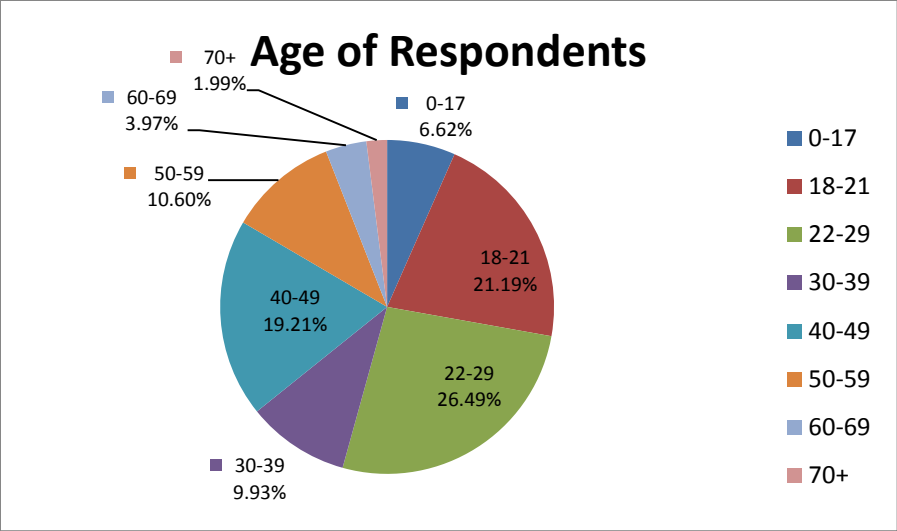
Apart from Hollywood, however, another more surprising area of media has begun including characters with Autism: video games. Since 2005, there have been five games released to the public with characters who have been identified by their creators as being diagnosed with Autism. These characters include Jade from Indigo Prophecy (2005), Corporal Simone Cole in Clive Barker's Jericho (2007), David Archer in two entries of the hit franchise Mass Effect (2010-2012), and most recently, Amy, in the survival horror title of the same name (2012). What is interesting about this is that this

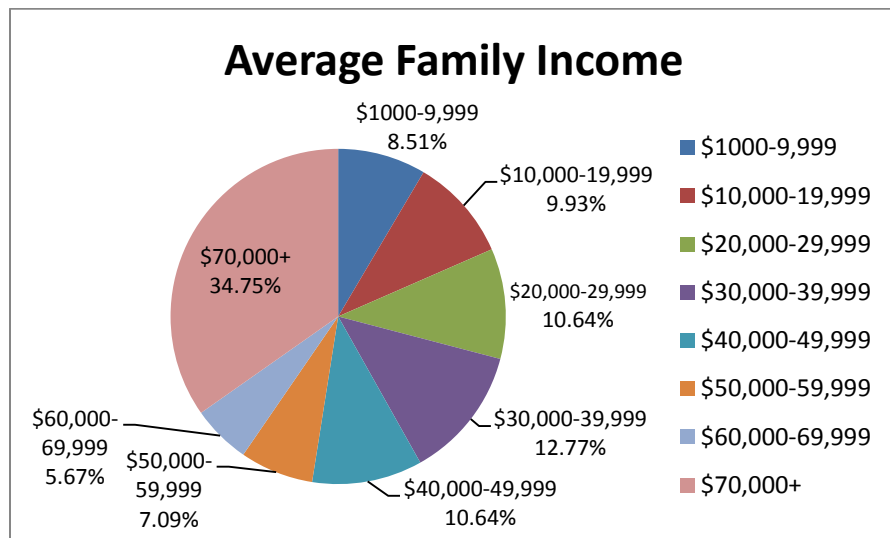
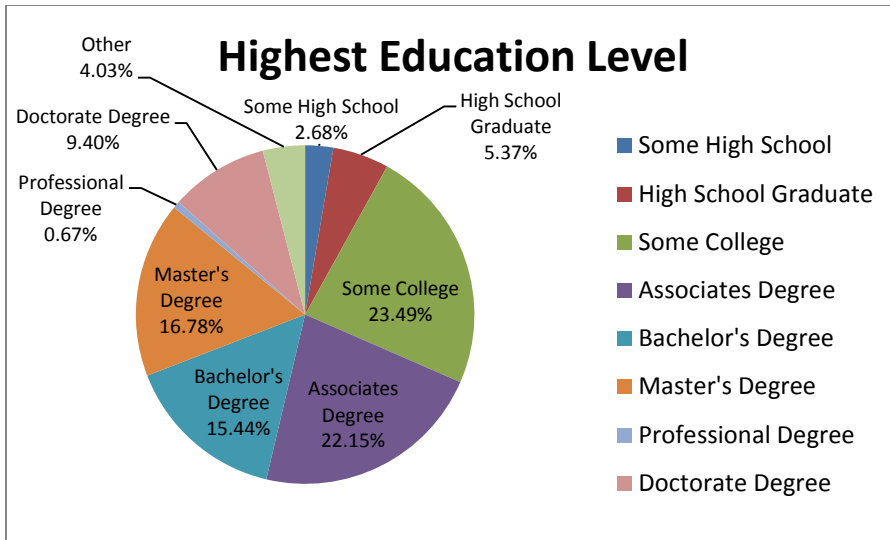
media appeals to a completely different part of the US population. It is highly unlikely that many people who consider themselves to be “gamers” would ever step foot in a budding romance movie such as Dear John. However, this media brings the face of Autism to a channel more accessible to them. While it is unclear how this will continue in the future, this is certainly a step in the right direction.

### **Society’s View on Autism**

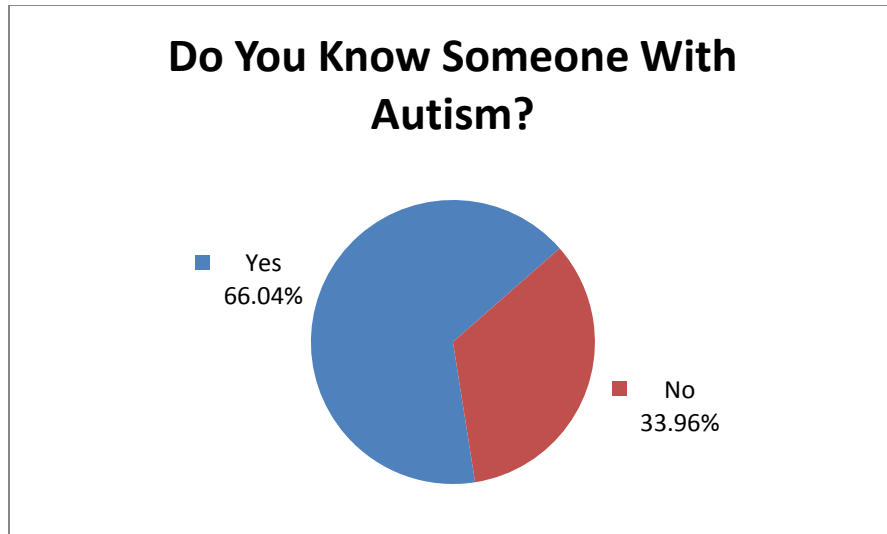
So what effect does this media exposure have on the general population? What is the general consensus on Autism amongst the majority of society? To find this answer, we look to a recent survey conducted in February of 2013.

Created to find the perspectives of Autism held by society, the survey was spread via several internet sites to as large a population as possible. Links to the survey were placed on the Aol, Yahoo, Amazon, and TehParadox discussion boards, as well as spread via Facebook. In addition, the survey was spread via email to the entire University of South Florida Saint Petersburg student body and faculty. In all, there were 162 respondents ranging from age 12 to 70+, with the majority falling in the range of 18-49 years of age. Respondents were 75% female and the majority had completed some degree of college – such as an associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s. Respondents were 83.33% Caucasian, and had average family incomes ranging from \$1000-\$70,000+, with the majority falling towards the latter end at 34.75%.





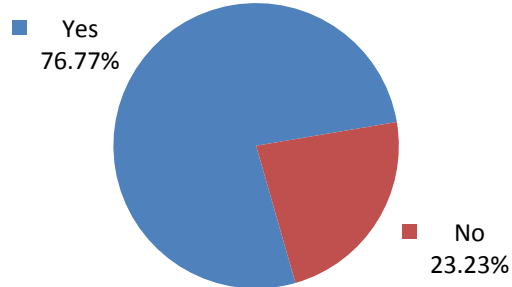
The actual survey began by first asking if the respondent knew someone with Autism prior to taking the survey. This was important because if the person taking the survey actually knows someone with Autism this would greatly impact the following answers in the rest of the survey. Overall, 66.04% of the respondents said that they actually did know someone with Autism.



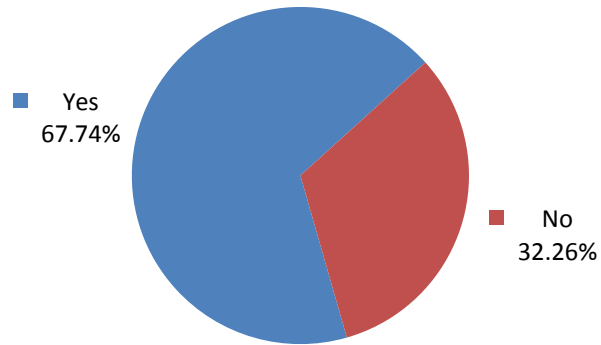
For the following questions respondents were asked to picture a person with a moderate degree of Autism. It was believed at the outset that if left open, respondents would greatly vary in the level of Autism they had in mind while completing the questions. Some would think of the extremely low end of the spectrum, while others would, in turn, think of the highest functioning individuals. The term “moderate” was then given to centralize their focus so that answers would not be as sporadic and varied. Once the focus of the respondents was set, they were then asked a series of “yes” or “no” questions based on whether or not they believed that an individual with a moderate level of Autism could complete various tasks such as: holding an even exchange of conversation, completing basic life skills, living on his/her own, seeking higher education, and most importantly obtaining meaningful employment. The results were as follows:



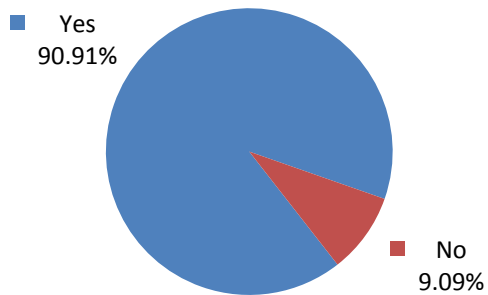
### Can Hold an Even Exchange of Conversation.



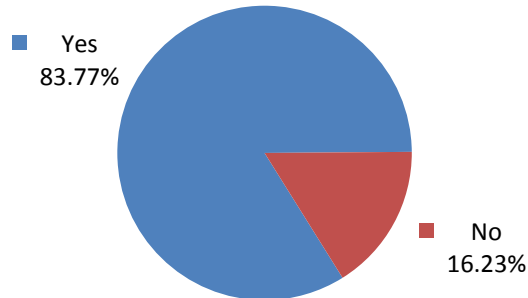
### Can Live On His/Her Own.



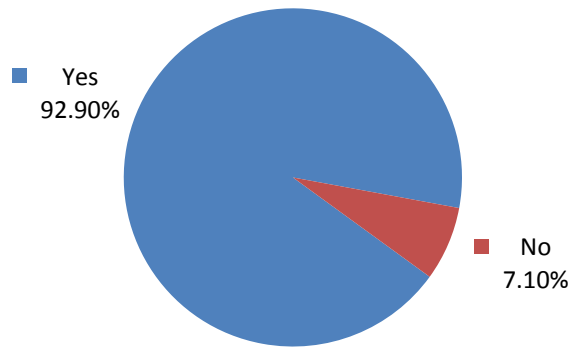
### Can Complete Basic Life Skills (Cooking, Cleaning, etc).



### Can Seek Higher Education (Bachelors, Masters, PHD, Technical School, etc).



### Can Obtain Meaningful Employment.



Overall, 76.77% of the respondents believed that individuals with Autism can hold an even exchange of conversation. This is huge, as when most people think of Autism, they think of it as a disability affecting communication. Further, 67.74% of respondents believed that individuals with Autism can live on their own, 90.91% of the respondents believed that individuals with Autism can complete basic life skills, 83.77% believed that they could seek higher education, and 92.90% believed that they could seek and obtain meaningful employment. This is absolutely tremendous! When reading the medical diagnosis, you get a picture of a person in mind that might not be able to do any

of these things. That society has gotten to the point where they believe the contrary is a complete flip from what might have been believed 10 years ago.

This becomes even more evident with the last two questions in the survey where respondents are asked to describe what Autism is as well as with what they believe a person with Autism actually looks like. Here are but a sample of the responses:

“People with ASD vary in different degrees of condition which is why "spectrum" is an appropriate term. ASD is a developmental disability and often people with ASD are very bright but display symptoms of social awkwardness or have preoccupations that are not considered normal.”

“It's pretty tough because every person who has it is different. What people need to understand is it might take more time to connect with people who have Autism, but it's worth it.”

“They look like any other person, it is the mental state that is altered, not really the physical”

“No. You cannot physically look at someone and know, for certain, that they have ASD. People with ASD can exhibit certain tendencies, but there is not a defining characteristic of ASD that is the same for anyone.”

All in all, it would appear that society has a pretty good grasp of what Autism really is. At the very least, most have high conceptions of what people with Autism are capable of. However, the true situation at hand lies beyond the face value of society.

### **III: Autism In the Workplace**

#### **A Multi-Layered Dilemma**

By now, you are probably wondering what the dilemma seems to be. After all, though the medical diagnosis lends itself to be very damaging, it would seem that multiple forms of media have gone to great lengths to reverse the effects of this. Moreover, the majority of society seems to have a fairly positive outlook as to what individuals with Autism are capable of. So, what seems to be the issue? Though society seems to regard individuals with Autism in a fonder light, people with Autism are not being employed. According to a recent study documented in Pediatrics in May of 2012, only 55.1% of individuals with Autism had paid employment at any point in up to six years after high school. (Shattack, Narendorf, Cooper, Sterzing, Wagner & Taylor, 2012) Now remember, over 90% of society believed that individuals with Autism could obtain meaningful employment. Why then are only 55.1% of the individuals in this study employed? Also, notice the terminology. We are speaking of flat employment rates. “Meaningful” employment rates come nowhere into this equation. Now, one might still say what’s the big deal? After all, the Autism community is rather small, right?

Wrong. In 2008, a study was completed by the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network. For this study, the ADDM Network collected data on 8 year old students in the areas surrounding its 14 sites spread across the United States. It is believed that 8 years old is the peak age for Autism identification. Out of all the students analyzed in the study, it was found that 11.3 per thousand, or 1 in 88, children had some degree of Autism. Broken down further, this study showed that 1 in 54

boys and 1 in 252 girls showed symptoms consistent with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. (Wingate et al, 2008) Since the time in which this study was completed, it is conjectured that these numbers have only increased. Now, to place this in perspective, let us consider the estimated number of people who turn will turn 18 each year. Based on current population figures, birth rates, and life spans in the United States, it is estimated that 4,197,500 will come of adult age this year alone. (Rothberg, 2012) Out of those, over 47,000 will have Autism. Span this out over the next decade and well over 470,000 individuals with Autism will become adults and will be seeking meaningful employment.

This is a serious problem that poses several crucial issues. The first of these is a moral one. Every year, tens of thousands of people who are perfectly capable and willing to work are being shunned from the workforce on the sole basis of their disability. Over 90% of the people from the survey were gung-ho in saying that individuals with Autism are more than capable of obtaining meaningful employment. However, this does not accurately represent what is happening in the workplace. When the time actually comes to actually hire someone with Autism, it appears as though society believes those with ASD are more than capable of finding employment, just as long it is somewhere else. This mentality is severely damaging for all those involved. First off, it is damaging to employers. As nobody is willing to “take the risk,” so to speak, and give meaningful employment to an individual with Autism, employers have no background knowledge of what a person with Autism can really do within their company. Furthermore, this mentality is absolutely detrimental to the self-esteem of the individuals seeking employment as well. What does a person do who tries to apply to place after place, and because he may not be as proficient at “selling himself” in a face to face interview due to

difficulties in communication, he is constantly turned down? This quickly can become a self-fulfilling prophecy; that person ends up doing nothing productive within society. Unable to share his many talents and give back, he is forced to sit home and do nothing. More importantly, he begins to feel quite worthless. He withdraws farther into himself, and does not feel that he is worth sharing to anyone. Eventually, he becomes alone. These are the products of this mentality. These are the stories that should never occur.

This moral issue comes bundled together with one of economic strain as well. In an article written in 2008, Dr. Michael L. Ganz investigates just how much an individual with Autism, who is unable to obtain employment, costs the United States throughout the course of his lifetime. Specifically, we will look at costs associated with the adult years of such an individual. In his article, Ganz distributes the overall costs to three areas of Direct Medical, Direct Non-Medical, and Indirect costs. Direct medical costs cover items such as emergency room visits, physician fees, drugs, various behavioral and alternate therapies, home health, and travel to these locations that a person uses over his lifetime. Over the course of the time, from the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday up to the time the individual turns 66 years old, which is the average age of mortality, each and every individual with Autism costs society an average of \$73,971 in direct costs. This comes coupled with direct non-medical costs as well. These costs cover areas such as: child/adult care, home improvements, respite care, special education, supported work, and other non-medical related expenses. Combined together over the same interval of time, these direct non-medical costs total around \$778,446 per individual. Finally, we take into account the indirect costs of the individual not working over the course of his lifetime. Aggregated productivity losses for individuals with Autism over the course of their adult lives come

out to about \$1,262,382 each. Totaled altogether, the cost associated with Autism is a little over \$2.1 million dollars per individual. (Ganz, 2007) Multiply this cost by the number of individuals with Autism in the United States today, and...well, you get the picture. We are talking trillions of dollars spent over the span of a less than 50 year period; national deficit proportions. This is a serious predicament; one whose costs, both moral and economic, increase each and every day, and will continue to increase unless something is done to rectify the situation.

### **A Simple Solution**

The fact that individuals with Autism are unable to find work in today's society is an unforgivable societal misstep, but the weight of this problem does not rest solely on the shoulders of the employers across the country. A large portion of this responsibility can be found in the roots of what society itself has become. America, as a whole, has grown into a highly time-oriented, bang-for-your-buck, fast paced society. Everything within our lives needs to have happened yesterday or people are ready to start complaining. Patience, as a quality, seems to have lost its allure with the increasing popularity of the internet and advent of mobile devices. Sending a letter in the mail, writing a check, all of these things have almost become novelties in today's world where email and instantaneous bank transactions can occur in a much faster period of time. Each and every day it seems as though America pushes itself to be faster and faster. This can be seen in just the wording of advertisements alone: 'Hot and Ready', 'Lightning Fast', 'High Speed', 'Same Day Repair.' People are increasingly drawn to what they can

get quick and easy. Why get the “slow” internet connection that takes 10 seconds to get information when you can have the newest one that only takes 2?

Bring this back now to the standpoint of the employer. They have got to make sure that when they are hiring, they can have a team that meets this quota of productivity brought on by society. When they hire someone, they need people who are dependable, people who show up on time, and can give them the best service for their dollar. Thus it seems logical that they might seem skeptical of hiring somebody with a disability such as Autism. After all, they feel the need to meet the fast paced needs of society. They need people who can learn the job and do it well, and there may be a sense of insecurity that an individual with Autism is actually up to the challenge. It is time to alleviate some of that insecurity by taking a look at proven results of what individuals with Autism can do.

Perhaps the best place to start would be Walgreens Packing and Distribution Centers across the country. Officially started in 2006 in a small distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina, a Walgreens Distribution Executive had the vision to create a facility in which individuals with and without disabilities would be able to work side by side. Everyone employed would be tackling the same tasks and be held to the exact same standards of production. Out of their almost 600 employee population in this facility, roughly 35-40% of the individuals had some form of disability, Autism included. Since that time, Walgreens has successfully integrated individuals with disabilities throughout all 21 of its distribution centers across the country. In each of those locations, Walgreens has performed studies to determine how the individuals with disabilities have been performing as compared to the individuals without disabilities. The results have been astounding! In the majority of the centers analyzed, individuals with disabilities



performed at a level on par with those individuals without disabilities. More exciting is the fact that in 10 locations, individuals with disabilities have actually been outperforming their non-disabled peers. Additionally, Walgreens performed studies on turnover rates across four of its locations over the course of a 3-year period. Results were determined by taking the number of individuals who left the facility by the end of each year, and dividing it by the total headcount. Overall, it was found that individuals with disabilities were 48% less likely to leave the company than individuals without a disability.

Furthermore, as individuals with disabilities were integrated into more and more areas of the distribution center, even more astounding results were discovered. Not only were individuals with disabilities able to operate the heavy machinery around the facility such as the lift trucks, but overall, they had 38% fewer safety incidents than individuals without disabilities. In addition, in another study, it was found that the costs associated with workers compensation claims for individuals with disabilities were 67% lower when it came to medical fees, 73% lower for paid indemnity, and 77% lower for paid expenses. (Kaletta, Binks & Robinson, 2012)

Overall it can be said that, according to these studies, individuals with disabilities in these distribution centers work at a level that is on par or higher than individuals without disabilities, have fewer accidents overall, and cost the company less money for workers compensation. That sounds like a sweet deal. Now, did this happen overnight? Of course not. Modifications were made to accommodate these individuals over the course of several years. However, the payoff is more than worth it. Now that the accommodations have been made, Walgreens now has access to an incredibly large

population of dedicated workers that they did not have in the past. More than this, knowing that Walgreens has made such a push, more people, especially those who know individuals with disabilities, would be more apt to shop there over some of its competitors.

Walgreens is not the only industry that has made a push to hire individuals with Autism. Several other companies have moved towards employing these gifted individuals as well. One such company, Aspiritech, has taken the lead from a software company in Denmark named Specialisterne. Located in Illinois, this company hires individuals with Autism to test smart phone apps. This is absolutely perfect as it takes what many would consider to be a disability, and turns it into ability. The medical diagnosis of Autism states that individuals with Autism are broken because they like repetitive tasks and can hyper-focus on one particular task. However, this company saw that ability as a boon. Anyone who has had programming experience knows bug testing in programs is a tedious and downright annoying process. It is very repetitive and can become frustrating quite quickly as one little stray bit of code or a missing semi-colon can cause a program to completely fail. However, remember that individuals with Autism like repetitive tasks, and they have a heightened ability to focus on something with dynamic precision until it gets done. Founder Brenda Weitzberg had the idea to place these two components together. This has resulted in those individuals hired by Aspiritech excelling beyond expectation. Not only have they successfully learned how to complete a multitude of tasks such as: compatibility, functional, and regression testing, but they have learned to do it quickly and efficiently. (Weitzberg, 2013) As the CEO of OptionsXpress states:

“We're in a very competitive industry, and making sure we have great, innovative technology for our customers that really gives them every advantage, is critical to us. What Aspiritech allows us to do is push out more technology faster. That really allows us to scale our QA and QC resources up and down based on where we are in our product development lifecycle, and do it very efficiently.” (Fisher, 2011)

Moreover, the employees love their work. In a letter to the company one set of parents writes how thrilled both they and their son are with his newfound career:

“This letter is to let you know how thrilled and impressed we are with Aspiritech. We are parents of a recent college graduate of computer science who has been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Our son's difficulty with communication makes it difficult to successfully find employment. Through networking, we found Aspiritech. Aspiritech has provided skilled people with AS an opportunity for meaningful employment and are accepting of their challenges. Our son has been given a lot of responsibility and this has helped with his self-esteem. They offer him much encouragement and show an appreciation for his many skills...” (Weitzberg, 2013)

This is what is meant when we talk of “meaningful employment.” Yes, the individual has been hired, but he has also been hired doing something that he loves and that has caused him to grow as a result. He has accomplished something that the medical diagnosis said he probably would not be able to ever accomplish.

Another company that has taken the plunge towards hiring individuals with Autism is the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association – College Retirement Equities Fund (TIAA-CREF) through their Fruits of Employment program. Designed by Heather Davis and James Emmett, the Fruits of Employment program employs individuals with Autism in two distinct agricultural locations, Badger Mountain in Washington and White Hills Vineyards in Southern California. Currently, 20% of the staff on hand in the two locations has been diagnosed with Autism. They perform the same exact tasks as the rest of the employed population in the fields. To date, the program has been amazingly successful. The individuals with Autism have been able to adapt to the job perfectly. (Standifer, 2012) Managers at the site speak specifically about one individual in particular who has performed exceptionally well in this setting:

“Nick's speed is about average for staff of Badger Mountain, but his scores on quality are amazing. For example, if he has a task of pruning trees, he will never have taken too many branches off or too few – always just enough... In addition, Nick was ALWAYS on time. One day Nick was five minutes late and was upset with himself the rest of the day... ‘I can't believe somebody cares so much about their job.’” (Standifer, 2012)

As for Nick himself, Emmett states that he loves the job where he can spend a great deal of time out in nature and get a great deal of exercise. This has been witnessed across the rest of those employed with Autism as well. (Standifer, 2012)

Imagine having a staff of people who love what they are doing and display it by performing exceptionally well with tremendous work ethic. These are the kinds of stories

being reported by these employers who have been willing to take the plunge. One thing to note about the three examples given above, however, is that in each case, the individuals employed with Autism are always out of the public eye. They are in a factory, an office, a field. They are always tucked away out of sight. Now this is by no means a criticism of these employers; these environments are a necessity of the respective positions being offered. At the same token however, due to the secluded nature of these environments, it is difficult for the public, and more importantly other employers, to see these individuals with Autism being successful in the workplace. There is amazing work being done in these establishments by all kinds of individuals with Autism, but nobody would know about it if they were not specifically researching it. This next business, however, remedies that problem and is a shining example for businesses across the nation to follow.

## **IV: The Future of Autism**

### **A Vision Established in Coffee**

Enter Vicky Westra, an executive of the Tampa Electric Company (TECO) in Tampa Bay, FL. Vicky had accomplished what many in the business world dream of; she had climbed the social ladder and garnered a great deal of wealth and success with her energy efficient building projects. However, Vicky knew that she was meant to do something more. Having an adopted daughter at home who was on the Autism spectrum, she was dismayed that individuals with Autism seemed to fall off society's radar once they hit adulthood. Once they became too old for the school districts to keep them, there was literally nothing for these individuals. Sure there were sympathetic ears all around, but nobody seemed willing to offer a solution. So, Vicky decided to make one herself with her husband Pierce. Vicky quit her job as a high executive and began a career for herself in a field in which she was passionate: coffee. Using Columbia beans, she began the extensive process of packaging and selling coffee using artwork drawn by children on the package. Proceeds would then go towards helping the cause of Autism. Thus, the non-profit company, Art for Autism, was born. Vicky and her husband were not sure where this would eventually lead them, but they knew this is where they had to start their journey. Something told her that this would grow, she just did not know where, when, or how.

Call it what you will, fate, divine guidance, or sheer coincidence, but it was not long before Vicky received her answer. In meeting with the general manager of Mercedes Benz of Tampa ,Frank Cuteri, it was mentioned that a new dealership was opening just

off of Dale Mabry. In that dealership, a small coffee shop was being built, and Frank asked if Vicky would like to take over it. Seeing an opportunity, Vicky asked what Frank thought of the entire business being run by individuals on the Autism spectrum. Frank said that it sounded like a great idea and the seed was planted. Vicky however, still had one problem; she knew how to roast, package, and sell coffee, but she did not know how to run a coffee shop. It was not too long though before divine intervention struck once again. Enter Michael Glisson, a successful regional manager for Starbucks Coffee who had recently been laid off due to forced cutbacks by the company. Michael had a great deal of experience in business management with several companies such as Lens Crafters and Mailboxes Etc. (now UPS), as well as a great deal of experience running coffee shops throughout America. More than anything, though, he knew that he wanted to be in a position where he could help people. As fate would have it, these two individuals met through a mutual friend, and found out that each person held the missing piece of their desire. Vicky had the vision, Michael had the knowhow. Thus, Artistas Café was born.

### **A Recipe for Success**

Two years into operation, Artistas Café has consistently received near perfect ratings in the areas of friendliness, service, knowledge of beverages, quality of beverages, café cleanliness, and impact on the overall dealership experience; all while utilizing a team made up completely of individuals on the Autism spectrum. Moreover, many people who come to the café have absolutely no idea that they are being serviced by those on the Autism spectrum until they look at the signs posted around the café. The team members

working at the café have mastered their craft that well. The secret to Artistas' success lies in its overarching philosophy that extends to every corner of the business. To begin with, new employees who come to the facility must undergo a period of training before they are hired on as full time staff. From the moment that they walk through the doors, they are told that they are perfect just the way they are. The experience is not about changing them, like a large portion of society tries to do, instead, it is about making them the very best possible versions of themselves. This philosophy, though simple in form, is revolutionary. All of their lives, these individuals with Autism have been told that they are not good enough. They are told that they need to change who they are to fit into society; that something is wrong with them. The results of the medical diagnosis leave them feeling worthless and isolated. The attitude of Artistas is the exact opposite. Team members are shown that they can become something.

During the course of the training, expectations are set high. Artistas Café sets the bar on what they call exceptional service. Team members are expected to brew four different blends of coffees, make smoothies, steam milk, brew tea, pull espresso shots and craft a plethora of recipes that must all be memorized and mastered to consistent perfection. At the same time, team members must keep both their side and the customer side of the café clean throughout the day. Team members must be dependable which means showing up for work on time each day, and being responsible for their own break times. They must complete inventory as well as perform every task that you would expect an employee within a café to do an exceptional standard. Leniency is not given in this regard. However, with that high standard of excellence comes a sense of positive praise and compassion. This combination is the key to success. Each and every day, team



members are given compliments on their service both by supervisors and each other. Instead of being told what they are doing wrong, they are praised for what they are doing right. Now, this is not to say that they never receive criticism. They are held to an expectation of excellence, after all. However, when they do, it is given in a constructive and encouraging manner. This positive language breeds a positive atmosphere. It makes them feel good about themselves which is something they were never allowed to do before, and makes them work harder for that praise.

Think about the last time you received a genuine compliment from someone. It felt good, right? Your head was lifted for a good portion of that day. Now, let us think about the last time you got a speeding ticket. That felt just wonderful, didn't it? Not only did you have to pay a fine of an excess of \$100 depending on how fast you were actually going, but you had to sit through boring classes to get points off your license. Then when all of that was finally over, you were likely back to speeding about a month later, right? Take that same scenario, and imagine if instead your insurance company had given you \$10 a month for abiding by the speed limit. Let us even make it \$20. Still not that much, but enough to show that they appreciate you doing a good job of not speeding, and to give you a little break on gas every month. Would you still speed? Likely not. At least not nearly as much – save maybe emergencies. So let us compare notes now. The point of the speeding ticket was to curb your behavior. You hated every bit of it, and after a month you were back to doing the same exact thing that got you in trouble in the first place. The point of the \$20 was exactly the same. The difference was that positive reinforcement actually worked. You started to speed less. This same ideology applies in full force at Artistas. If negative reinforcement or punishment worked, these individuals

would have been shining examples of society by the age of 10. Most of their life, they have received negative reinforcement concerning their abilities or work, and it has instead caused them to withdraw into themselves and feel worthless. When they are opened to the positive environment that is Artistas, however, they begin to shine. They strive to meet those expectations and almost always exceed them.

Perhaps the most notable feature of Artistas, as was mentioned previously, however, is the fact that each person employed must work the front counter and interact with hundreds of customers each day. This is amazing for two reasons. First, this is something that the medical diagnosis says that they would never be able to do well. These employees have to hold full conversations, make eye contact, spread their focus to monitor three to four customers at a time; all things that are inherently impossible. Yet, they are able to do it because of the time that was taken for this to be modeled for them, and because they rose to the expectations set for them.

More importantly, however, is the fact that every individual who steps up to the counter is able to witness that fact for themselves. The slogan for Artistas Café is: “Changing Lives, One Bean at a Time.” Many do not realize it, but that slogan has a double meaning. On one side, it talks about the team members working at the café themselves. Before this, the team working there was unable to find employment anywhere. They lived lives of seclusion – having nothing to do but sit in their rooms and play video games. They had no outlet to give back to society. Artistas has given them that chance and they have thrived. Not only have they become more social, but their overall dispositions have changed towards a positive light. They love what they come in to do

each and every day, and it shows on their faces. Artistas has definitely changed their lives.

However, there is another side to that saying as well. One of the main goals of Artistas Café is to redefine the face of Autism. Every customer who walks into the café comes equipped with certain schema in mind of what people with Autism are like and what they can do. When placing their orders, they have a completely normal experience at the front counter. In fact, many come away with a downright pleasant experience and walk to their seat with a cheerful disposition after speaking to the team. It is not until they actually get to their seat and read the signs about Autism, however, that they finally make the connection. The way they perceive individuals with Autism has now been changed forever. The same can be said of the employees of Mercedes Benz who interact with the team each and every day. As Simon Tickett, a sales representative within the dealership states in an interview:

“The trepidation that we had, or at least that I had, was that some of the customers would be in a hurry and may not understand if our team members here in the café took a little longer...I’m very impressed. The coffee is fantastic. The service is fantastic, and the guys are definitely part of our team. The stereotypes that everybody has really just get dispelled when you work on a day to day basis with an individual who has a disability. You realize that it’s not really a disability. It’s just [that] they see things in a different way that we do.” (Tickett, 2012)

The experience of Artistas Café has changed all of their lives.

Artistas Café as a whole is absolutely revolutionary in their business design. Nowhere else in the world is there a company that has a full front-line staff all diagnosed with Autism, and for Vicky and Michael, this is just the beginning. Their shared vision is to create a model that all companies and employers will eventually come to follow; not just in the Tampa Bay area or across the state of Florida for that matter. Their eyes are set globally. They have the solution to society's problem, and they are ready to begin paving the way towards a better future for those with Autism. The proof of their devotion and guaranteed success lies in the lives they have touched in just this one location alone. So let us now take a closer look at a few of these Artistas, as they are called, to examine the true face of Autism.

(\*Note: In order to maintain the privacy of these individuals and their families, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.)

### **Lester**

*“When most people think of Autism, they think of a person who’s not able to function very well, or not able to work well in society, and that’s not the case. Take me for example. I have a very minor case of Autism, and I’m able to run the whole café by myself. So, I wanted to show that we’ve got what it takes.”*

Likely the first person that you will meet coming into the café will be none other than Lester, with a giant smile and a cheerful disposition that will brighten your day no matter what your mood. Lester is certainly the most outgoing of the bunch, and does not hesitate to greet each and every customer that steps into the café, even if they are just in

passing. Lester was not always this way, however. Born up north, Lester moved around to several states before his family finally settled in Florida. No matter where he moved, though, there was one thing that always followed him, his diagnosis of Autism. Though he does not talk a lot about his social life prior to high school, it becomes apparent through listening to him how his diagnosis has affected his life. Prior to coming to the café, Lester sought many different outlets to try and give back to his community such as a local aquarium. It seemed that he was always able to volunteer at various places, but when it came down to actually finding a paying job, he was not as lucky. Lester tried to find employment at many different locations. His avid passion for gaming first led him to try his luck at several different electronics stores. He would leave his applications with store clerks, but would never hear anything back. He then tried several other companies, but the answer was always the same. Each one denied him employment. Though no company could legally say that it was his disability that was keeping him from being employed, this fact became painfully obvious quite quickly. Artistas Café changed that trend, however.

In his initial interview, Michael and Vicky both saw tremendous potential and ability, and thus Lester was one of the very first hires to the café. Since that time, Lester has absolutely thrived. It is the running joke around the café that Lester treats every day there like it is Christmas, but this very accurately describes the level of excitement and enthusiasm that he brings to the café. It is very seldom that Lester is without a smile on his face, and he makes a conscious effort to ensure that every customer who walks up to the café leaves with a grin just as wide. He makes a point to banter with customers who might not be in the best of moods due to their recent dealings with the financing

department at the dealership, and before long their mood has always turned. Lester's cheerful demeanor and outgoing personality are honestly quite contagious, and it is an absolute pleasure to work alongside of him.

When it comes to actual café operations, Lester has most assuredly mastered his craft. Whether it is brewing coffee, steaming milk, pulling espresso shots, etc, Lester always brings his A-game and consistently provides high quality beverages to the customers. Moreover, Lester constantly tries to improve himself. He is not one who is satisfied with stagnation in his skills behind the bar. Because of this, he is always willing to try new things to increase efficiency and productivity while at the same time making sure that quality stays above par. Lester is also very dependable. He drives himself to work and almost always arrives well in advance of his shift so that he is absolutely ready to be "on" when his shift begins.

When Lester is not working at the café, he can be found playing video games or pursuing his absolute passion; art. To say that Lester is a phenomenal artist would be a gross understatement of his abilities. Something Lester learned to do early on was use his Autism to his advantage. While it somewhat inhibited his social skills growing up, it also gave him a tremendous mind's-eye. The skill to which he can pull dreams and mental images together and then transfer them to paper is absolutely astounding. What he can do in a matter of a minute would take a normal person hours. Perhaps what is even more astounding, however, is that all of his artwork has a very intricate and well-laid-out story behind it. In fact, much of what he does all stems from a single universe that he has created through his artwork. He is very talented and creative when it comes to designing storyboards, and he can explain each of his characters in great depth, as well as relate the

inner-workings of this universe that he has created. Those who are given this explanation are always blown away by the extensive amount of thought and creativity that go into the stories behind each and every drawing. What is also evident is that within this myriad of stories and characters, Lester has implanted his own life philosophies and experiences. Michael and Vicky noticed this incredible creativity and potential early on, and assigned Lester the task of designing bean characters to represent all of the coffee brands at the café. Thus, Lenny, Vinny, Claude, and Hazel were born to represent the Medium, Bold, Decaf, and Hazelnut brews respectively. Each character takes on the characteristics of their respective coffee blend, and nobody explains it better than Lester, himself.

In all, Lester is one of the most charismatic and genuine individuals you will ever meet. He will always bring a smile to your face and his multifaceted abilities both in and outside of the café are absolutely astounding. He has absolutely thrived in this setting, and Artistas is proud to have him as a member of the team.

### **Mike**

*“I want people to see that Autism is not a disability. Because you have Autism doesn’t mean you can’t be productive and be a strong asset to the company. Most aren’t given a chance like we’ve been given.”*

After your mood has been brightened by Lester, your beverage will likely be quickly and efficiently prepared by Mike. Mike is the younger brother of Lester, and has also been diagnosed with Autism. However, though the two brothers share a diagnosis, their personalities could not be more different. Whereas Lester is spontaneous, cheerful,

and outgoing, Mike is a little bit more shy and reserved. Placed together, these two complement each other incredibly well. As they were born just three years apart, these two brothers share much of the same history, and unfortunately they both share the same luck in the job hunting department. Luckily, they both found Artistas at the same time and have improved dramatically over the course of their employment.

When Mike first started at the café, he was much more withdrawn than his brother. Though very respectable and polite, he was nowhere near an avid conversationalist. He would respond courteously to direct questions, but much preferred to be left to his own resources after he had learned a task. Since his time at the café, however, Mike has absolutely blossomed. It did not happen overnight, but throughout his time there, he has greatly emerged from the shell that he had built around himself. Constant modeling and genuine praise over the course of his time there showed him that he was capable of bringing down the defenses he had so tirelessly built over his lifetime. He was able to trust other people without fear of backlash. More importantly, he learned that what he had to say mattered. People cared about his input, his knowledge, and wanted to see the real him that he had tucked away. At the beginning of his experience, Mike's smiles to the customer were always forced and short. Again, he was not impolite. He just was not one to spark up a conversation. Now, however, when he smiles, it is genuine. He approaches people to talk to them. He greets them warmly. He shares of himself whereas this did not happen before. He is still not a Lester, but that is okay. Not everybody can be a Lester. What is important is that he has made tremendous gains towards becoming the very best form of Mike. If everybody was as outgoing and energetic as Lester, the world would never sleep. All people, Autistic or not, have varying



personalities. One is not necessarily better than the other. What is important is that each person's personality is allowed to shine through in a positive manner. Mike has made been able to reach that threshold.

When it comes down to work within the café, Mike can be described using three words: thorough, meticulous, and efficient. Mike is arguably the hardest working individual within Artistas Café, which is by no means a defamation of the other team members' work ethics. However, when Mike steps behind the counter he is like a machine. He can take and prepare orders quickly with dynamic precision and accuracy. Quality never suffers on his watch. He is highly attentive to his work environment as well as the area outside of the counter. He consistently checks to ensure that the tables, counters, and serving areas are kept in tip-top shape. If a customer gets up and leaves the café without throwing away their beverage, he is there within seconds to wipe up and take everything away. Moreover, he is quick to bring to the acting supervisor's attention any mishaps that happen within or outside of the café. If he were to ever be assigned a grade for performance, it would consistently be a AAA+ every day.

Outside of the café, Mike gives his brother a run for his money when it comes to artistic talent. Mike is another absolutely amazing artist who has an art style completely different from his brother. Whereas Lester's drawings often seem to take on a more comic-style appearance, Mike strives for exceptional realism. The way he blends color and texture is absolutely stunning. He is also, like his brother, attending college to take art classes in order to constantly improve upon his innate abilities. He is very modest of his talent, and always seeks to better himself. Most notable of his works are his fish, which are currently on display within the café itself. Michael and Vicky have made it a

point to draw attention to these two brothers' talents within the café by displaying their phenomenal pieces on an art wall for all customers to see, which truly highlights their passion and integrating it within the whole Artistas experience. Customers to the café are constantly set in awe of the refined talent that these two individuals possess.

Overall, Mike is one of the hardest workers you will ever meet. He is dependable, talented, courteous, and a model employee for all to see. Artistas is truly lucky to have him on board.

### **Sam**

*"I love making every espresso beverage AWESOME! I want customers to tell others, we make perfect beverages! They are Masterpieces!"*

Another individual you might meet around the café is none other than Sam. Sam is a somewhat shy and bashful individual, but is a tremendous asset to the café. Living in Tampa Bay for several years now, Sam went to Pepin Academy for high school. After that, his story is similar to Lester in that he started going from organization to organization completing various volunteer work and trainings. People were willing to take him on without pay, but not for an actual employed position. That is until Artistas entered his life.

Sam had heard about Artistas from a friend from high school and decided to enter their internship program in the hopes that he could receive some form of paid employment to both give back to the community and help to support his family. When he

first came to the café, Sam was very withdrawn and unsure of himself as an individual. He did not look people in the eye, and only gave short one-word responses to questions. Throughout most of the interview, he held his hands in his lap and looked down at his feet. Any other person who had him in an interview might have assumed that he was not capable of this kind of work, but Michael and Vicky saw potential. They felt a connection with Sam, and knew that he could do great things within the company if they just worked with him. Fast forward to several weeks of the “Recipe for Success” as described prior, and Sam had made tremendous gains within the café. Fast forward to today, and Sam has become a truly dedicated and responsible individual who is a pleasure to work alongside. When speaking to Sam, he still does not always make direct eye contact, but he will definitely look at you and hold a prolonged conversation. Moreover, if he has something very important to tell you, he will lock eyes with you throughout the duration of the statement. Delays in speaking that he might have had in the very beginning have shrunk dramatically over the course of his time with the café. Whereas it would take him several seconds to respond with even the simplest of one word answers before, now he can handle the ebb and flow of conversation with ease. Sam has a very straight-forward personality, and he will often tell you exactly what he thinks about something. However, he has also gained the ability to exchange quick quips with customers and other employees at the café. He has become multi-faceted in his conversation skills, and, like Mike, has greatly opened up himself and blossomed in this setting. Where he was exceptionally withdrawn before, now he has opened himself up to trust other people with his inner self, and gained the confidence that he once lacked. He now knows that he has something special to offer those around him and makes a point to extend the invitation

towards conversation. Moreover, whereas before he would shy away from all physical contact with other people, now he openly embraces friends and coworkers. Sam has definitely found his inner light.

When it comes to work at the café, Sam has a sense of hyper-awareness of what needs to get done at all times. Much like Lester and Mike, he is highly self-driven. If he sees that something needs to be done, he does it automatically without a second thought, and he constantly makes rounds throughout the café to ensure that everything is running as it should. Sam is highly dependable. Each day he arrives a half hour to an hour in advance of his start time so that he can prepare himself mentally for his shift. He can often be seen in the café with his earbuds playing heavy rock before his shift starts in order to psych himself up and put himself in the correct mindset so that when his shift officially starts, he is ready to go. On the clock, Sam does an excellent job at taking orders from the customers and preparing each beverage with exceptional quality and precision. Though he does not have quite as high a speed as Mike in the café, you can rest assured that every beverage he prepares will be exceptional and perfect according to the recipe. His dedication to creating an exceptional product is evident as many repeat customers to the café ask for him specifically to make beverages, stating, “He knows just how [they] like it.” In fact, Sam has gotten such a good rapport with customers that he often knows what they want before they even order it. He takes the idea of exceptional service and makes it his own within the cafe. His dedication and exceptional work ethic ranks him as a highly valued member of the Artistas staff.

## **Final Percolations**

Notice that in each of these scenarios, what these individuals have become was already there inside of each of them. Those wonderful personalities lay deep inside of each of those individuals, buried by years of rejection, frustration, and altogether negativity. The focus of Artistas café is not to change individuals with Autism. Society tries that, and it does not work. Instead, Artistas focuses on showing these individuals that they are important. Just because they have a prognosis that dictates what they can and cannot accomplish in their life does not mean that they have to be the product of that prognosis. They have natural talents and abilities that can and will blossom if properly tapped. So how does Artistas do it? It is not like they have broken some adult Autism code or created some complicated formula. Their approach is simple. Treat one another with compassion and understanding, boost each other daily, hold high expectations, and look for the potential within each and every individual. Simple ideas that have a large impact on all who come in contact with them. Artistas does not change people. They change lives; one bean at a time.

## **V: Conclusion**

Autism affects millions of people each and every day. It is a challenge not only faced by the individuals with Autism themselves, but by their respective families as well. Doctors and medical physicians paint a very grim picture for what these individuals will be able to accomplish within their lifetime. This is highly damaging as it creates an altogether incorrect picture of what an individual with Autism really looks like. The expectations created from such a diagnosis lead to depression, anxiety, and seclusion for all involved. So many families are grasping for hope for their brothers, cousins, sisters, children, and close friends diagnosed with Autism. Luckily, through the efforts of Hollywood and other organizations, society has finally begun to change their perception of what Autism actually is. Society is on the right track, but it still has so far to go. Without a way to give back to their community, many individuals with Autism are left without purpose, without direction for their lives. They become a burden to society when they really have so much untapped potential within themselves. Artistas Café and other businesses have taken up the torch and are leading the way to a solution for this problem. It is within reach. It can happen. All that is required is for businesses across the country to finally take that leap of faith towards giving these individuals an opportunity and a purpose.

Remember, if you will, the individual from the opening scenario of this paper. 47,000 individuals with Autism turn 18 each and every year. More than likely, such an individual has already crash landed outside your town. He has probably been there for a while – getting turned down and rejected wherever he goes. His self-image may be rather

poor, and he may be close to giving up hope. The question you must ask yourself now is, if you were to meet him tomorrow, will you be the one who gives him a chance?

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