

# MY PATH TO REGAINING MY INDEPENDENCE<sup>1</sup>

BY: JASON BUNN-PARSONS, CERTIFIED RECOVERY/PEER SUPPORT SPECIALIST  
MAY 30, 2020

All articles referenced in the endnote can be downloaded for free at [www.aacphoenix.com](http://www.aacphoenix.com)  
Outline is designed to be used in conjunction with the video with the same title.

I wasn't diagnosed with Autism until I was 40 years old in 2009. The 20 years prior to that was filled with vocational futility resulting in me going on SSDI. The 11 years since have been a time of learning about myself and what I as an Autistic was meant to be. Starting in 2012, I had a good enough understanding of myself that I laid out my 1<sup>st</sup> plan of action to help me regain my independence. Unfortunately, it required potential employers to open their minds to the possibility that I could exceed their expectations which were based on their textbook understanding of my diagnosis.

However, I never gave up. A major reason why was because I wasn't diagnosed until 40. This meant that the foundation of what I believe about myself was not Autism-centric; but based on the strengths I demonstrated and the success I experienced during my pre-diagnosis years. In other words, I rejected the notion that my struggles should be the sole basis for defining who I am.

In 2017, I tipped the 1<sup>st</sup> domino that has led me to the brink of independence which I'll formally achieve in July of 2020. In this presentation, I will not only talk about all the dominos that have fallen over the past 2 ½ years, but also how I laid a foundation that gave me the knowledge and self-confidence needed to achieve this goal.

## **THE EMPLOYERS & OTHER ORGANIZATIONS THAT GAVE ME THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT I NEEDED**

- ❖ **The One Time Visitor to My Monthly Meeting (November 2017):** Told me about Peckham
- ❖ **Peckham Inc. (January – March 2018):** Provide employment training for individuals with disabilities.
  - After telling the interviewer about my goal of regaining my independence from social security, she told me about the “Ticket to Work” program and the Beacon group was 1 of only 2 places that I could go at the time to sign up for the program.
  - All immediate supervisors have various disabilities, making them understand of the legitimacy of the struggles that their subordinates. This created a positive and supportive atmosphere.
  - Unfortunately, the only client Peckham had at the time had requirements that I could not meet no matter what accommodations I was given.
  - The couple of months I was there abled me to save up enough money to go on to the next stage of my plan.
- ❖ **Beacon Group (January – November 2018):** Provides employment services.
  - Back in 2015, I went to Vocational Rehabilitation for employment service, but it was as ineffective for me as it was for every Autistic who told me their personal stories due to systemic issues.
  - The job openings that they listed were comprehensive, not just jobs in which employers had low expectations of their employees with disabilities.
  - My case worker...
    - ...remain worked with me until my case was closed, enabling me to have continuity of services.
    - ...thought outside the box to find the right solution for me, instead of assembly line solutions.

- ...help me lay out a plan that would eventually lead me to fulfilling my goal of regaining my independence.
- ❖ **RI International (April 2018 – Present):** Provides training for those who want to provide mental health services.
  - The lifelong vocation that I chose was that as a Peer Support Specialist because it would give me the professional accreditation needed to fulfill my long term goal of eventually starting a non-profit organization that would meet a variety of needs in the Autism community.
  - I chose RI over all the other organizations that taught Peer Support Certification because of the passion that Vicki Rainey had when telling me about the program she co-taught. It was obvious to me that she was a true believe in what she was saying, not someone who was just collecting a paycheck.
  - The principle taught by RI validated everything that...<sup>2</sup>
    - ...I've been trying to tell my fellow Autistics/Aspies since my diagnosis in 2009
    - ...the Autistic self-advocacy community has been trying to get the Autism specific organizations to understand and accept.
- ❖ **Area Agency on Aging (March 2019 – February 2020):** Provides services for individuals who are 60+ years old, including a US citizenship class that I was a volunteer English teacher for.<sup>3</sup>
  - Learned of this program via volunteer.com, were I did a search for English classes that I could be part of due to my prior experiences with a variety of different class.
  - Enabled me to “reinvent my job history.”
  - Gave me the opportunity to demonstrate that I can succeed in the right vocational and social settings.
  - AAA...
    - ...provides a structured curriculum and the flexibility for teachers to figured out what worked for them. Supervisors worked with the teacher in assessing the effectiveness of what they were doing so they could develop individualized strategies that fit both the teachers and students.
    - ...was so pleased with me that they wanted to work with me to recruit more Autistics as volunteer teacher.
- ❖ **United Cerebral Palsy of Central Arizona (March 2020- Present):** Originally only provided services for individuals with Cerebral Palsy, but now serves anyone with any developmental disability.
  - I disclosed my Autism as an asset that has the potential of making me a better employee during my initial interview with Mary.
  - Provided me with a job that had expectations that I could fulfill.
  - Although a couple of my fellow staff members were nervous due to their understanding of Autism gave them legitimate grounds to be concern that I could have problems in certain situations, it only took me a day or 2 to gain the complete confidence of all of my co-workers.
  - I am expected fulfill all of the duties and expectations of any paid staff member.
  - A couple of members who receive services from us are given the opportunities to make contributions that would cause some to think they were actually paid staff.

- ❖ **Food Deliveries and Ride Shares (April 2020 – Present):** My master plan for regaining my independence was to get a car so I could use the self-driving services for emergency income in the event that I would lose my job for whatever reason.

### THOSE WHO HELPED LAY THE FOUNDATION OF MY SUCCESS

- ❖ **My Parents:**<sup>4</sup>
  - **My Adoption:** Made it impossible for my birth mom, who I was reunited with (along with the rest of my birth family) after 17½ years on my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, to clarify specific points about my early development that might have radically changed the assessments that the experts made about me.
  - **My Adoptive Parents:** Yes, we now know that SOME the expectations that they and my teacher had for me at the time was unrealistic for someone with Autism. However, I did meet or succeed many other expectations that they had, giving me the strength to persevere through the adversities of life that has enable me to garner the respect of those who get to know me.
  - **My Birth Mom:**
    - A now retired LPN who was able to recognize me as an Autistic/Aspie after attending an in service hosted by the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center in February 2009.
    - The recognition of my Autism/Asperger's resulted in a period in which we had to figure out what that means as far as how we interact with each other.
- ❖ **Sue Golubock (now retired Occupational Therapist) & Tara Marshal (Speech Language Pathology Assistant) (September 2009 – Present):** The Co-Organizers of the monthly "High Functioning" Autistic/Aspie support group that I joined in order to learn about Autism/Asperger's.
- ❖ **Dr. Bryan Woodruff:** A neurologist who joined our group for personal reasons and share his professional knowledge freely. Was very instrumental in helping me gain a solid understanding of the basic fundamentals of human neurology and how Autism effects it.
- ❖ **Cub/Boy Scouts (A few months each in the mid-70s & early 80s):** One of several positive social experiences that I had during my childhood.<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ **Word of Grace Church (1986 – 1996):**
  - Provided me with numerous volunteer opportunities that tied into my strengths.
  - Developed the "New Wine" program: Helped me develop many skills that Autistics/Aspies are known to struggle with:<sup>2,6</sup>
    - Self-assessment of my character and actions
    - Theory of mind
    - Emotional intelligence
    - Analyzation of situation I found myself in, including how my actions and/or inaction impacted event.
    - Stress management
    - Conflict resolution
    - My right as an individual to voice my objection to things I don't like.
    - Effective advocating of my needs, wants and desires.
    - Other general abilities in socialization

❖ **Covenant of Grace Church (1998 – 2000 & 2010 – 2015):**

- Provided me with numerous volunteer opportunities that tied into my strengths, including getting me started in cross-cultural outreach.<sup>3</sup>
- After I returned there following my diagnosis, they allowed me to host Autism meetings & events.

❖ **First Arabic Baptist (2003 – 2010 & 2020 – Present):**

- Provided me with numerous volunteer opportunities that tied into my strengths, including getting me started in cross-cultural outreach.<sup>3</sup>
- The topical discussion format and small size of the Bible studies were a perfect fit for me to demonstrate my Autistic strengths.<sup>7</sup>
- Was the church I was attending at the time of my diagnosis, as well as the years leading up to it. Not only did they endure the fallout from the complete collapse of my self-confidence and self-esteem do to my 20 years of vocational futility, but also the confusion that I experienced trying to understand what this new label of mine meant and further deterioration of my self-esteem due to me going on SSI. I chose at the time to leave and return to Covenant of Grace where I could fade into the background enough, but not too much, until I could get my head on straight. I've since returned here to resume my cross-cultural outreach.

❖ **Lutheran Church of the Master (2016 – 2018):**

- Allowed me to host a monthly Autism meeting.
- Although it was too small to provide me with many opportunities for volunteerism, I took full advantage of the ones that were presented to me.
- The topical discussion format and small size of the Bible studies were a perfect fit for me to demonstrate my Autistic strengths.<sup>7</sup>
- Although being part of the Christmas bells choir back-to-back years was challenging for me for numerous of reasons, the other members of the choir were very supportive of me in figuring out accommodations that would enable me to succeed.
- The summer I was with them, they hosted a vacation Bible school, which include a nightly puppet show that gave me an opportunity to be a puppeteer. The lady that wrote the skit included an Autistic child as one of the characters and asked me to review what she wrote. I felt good that this character gave a positive understanding of who we are, which I believe I had a major influence on creating in her mind.
- This was the church I was attending when I finally was able to lay out my path to independence and was very supportive of my endeavor. Not only in terms of encouragement, but by truly believing in my abilities.

**THE BENEFITS OF A TRUE PERSON FIRST MINDSET VS. THE SHAM OF JUST PERSON FIRST RHETORIC**

When you look through all of the people and organizations that have had a role in my achievement, you will find the Autism specific organizations played almost no role in it. Almost all of the ones that did had minimum to no specific knowledge about Autism; but had a great understanding of people. It might be said that these individuals and organizations used a TRUE person first approach.

The person first movement emphasizes putting the person ahead of the struggle, whether your referring to a disability or personal demons, because you should treat every first and foremost as a human being. Instead of saying "Schizophrenic," you say, "a person with Schizophrenia." It sounds good in theory, but I do have a couple of issues with it, especially when applying it to Autistics/Aspies.

- ❖ I do not believe that Autism should be treated as a TRUE disability because it is well known that many of us outperform non-Autistics in certain areas. The fact that some of us have no known usable strengths should not be used to silence those of us who do when we try to plead our case publicly. By treating the term Autism exclusively as something referring to a disability, we are allowing our deficits which we are solely defined by in the DSM<sup>8</sup> to blot out our strengths that many of us display on a regular basis.
- ❖ Just because you change someone's vocabulary, that doesn't mean you can't change their attitudes and perceptions. So what if you refer to me as "a person with Autism" if the next thing you do is try to figure out how to interact with me based solely on what the textbooks say. If you use a true person first approach, the first thing you're going to do is find out who I am as an individual by having a pleasant conversation with me and/or giving me the opportunity to show you what I'm good at.
- ❖ You can change the label of anything, but the stigma associated with one label is going to follow it to the next. It doesn't matter if you're talking about a disability or someone trying to circumvent their reputation by changing their name. The problem isn't their name, it's the image that comes to the public's mind when it hears and reads it. The same is true for disabilities that have stigmas that must be challenged if those who struggle with them are going to overcome them, and for society to give us the benefit of the doubt in order to help us in that endeavor.

### **MY CURRENT SITUATION, AS OF MAY 30, 2020**

The Corona Virus has interfered with the plans of just about everyone on the planet, including me. After I was furloughed<sup>9</sup> by United Cerebral Palsy in early April, I started driving for DoorDash which provided me with enough income to sustain me through this setback. In early May, UCP gained special funding which allowed them to switch all of their employees to paid leave until the end of June, unless we are able to go back to work sooner. Barring any setbacks worse than are already occurring, I'm still confident that I will achieve complete financial independence by July.

---

<sup>1</sup> Getting Autistic Aspie Off Public Assistance

<sup>2</sup> "AAC's Recovery Approach to Autistic Self Improvement and Advocacy (Basis for Believing in a Different Approach.)"

<sup>3</sup> "Cross-Cultural Outreach" on pages 6 and 7 of "Everything Autistics/Aspies Really Need to Know About Social Skills."

<sup>4</sup> "My Story."

<sup>5</sup> "Cub/Boy Scouts" on page 3 of "Everything Autistics/Aspies Really Need to Know About Social Skills."

<sup>6</sup> "12 Step Meetings (Mostly 'New Wine')" on pages 5 and 6 of "Everything Autistics/Aspies Really Need to Know About Social Skills."

<sup>7</sup> "Sunday School & Other Bible Studies" on pages 4 and 5 of "Everything Autistics/Aspies Really Need to Know About Social Skills."

<sup>8</sup> Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: Provides Americans with the official diagnostic criteria for all mental health issues. The latest, DSM 5, came out in 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning that they put me right back to work just as soon as it's safe to do so.