

## MY STORY

BY: JASON BUNN-PARSONS

UPDATED: MAY 30, 2020

*“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”<sup>1</sup>*

**BEFORE PASSING HARSH JUDGMENTS ON MY PARENTS AND TEACHER FOR HOW THEY VIEWED MY BEHAVIOR, AS WELL AS HOW THEY DID AND DID NOT RESPOND TO HOW MY PEERS TREATED ME, REMEMBER THAT EVERYONE WAS DEALING WITH ME ACCORDING TO THE BEST INFORMATION AT THE TIME. HAD THEY KNOWN WHAT IS KNOWN TODAY ABOUT AUTISM, EVERYTHING WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT.**

### MY CHILDHOOD

I was born May 6, 1969, in Topeka, Kansas, to Daniel and Phyllis Bunn. I had two brothers: Travis, a year older than me and Troy, a year younger. In 1971 my dad left us, and my mother moved the family to Cody, Wyoming. The Wyoming State Welfare Department removed us kids from our home for reasons that are inconsequence to this book. My brothers were given to different relatives on my dad's side.

I was put into care of foster parents, Paul and Pat Zimmerman, because I had been diagnosed having epilepsy at 14 months of age and was on two powerful anti-seizure medications. This condition, which few outside the medical establishment had any understanding of at the time, was so intimidating to all my relatives that it was believe this would be in my best interest until my mom could resume guardianship of all of us. Because no one knew of my Autism at that time, it was assumed by all that the medication was the cause of my lack of social/relational, emotional, cognitive, etc. development. One time my foster parents took me camping and forgot my medication; but observed no seizure activity. It was therefore decided that I should be taken off the medications.

In April 1974, my Mom was finally persuaded by the Welfare Department to sign my adoption papers. My Dad and grandparents on his side of the family tried to win custody of me; but in December of that year, the judge ruled in favor of Ray and Rinda Parsons of Rock Springs, Wyoming. Along with me getting my third set of parents in the first five and a half years of my life, I also got a new bother, Sean (two and a half years older than me). The “Honey-moon” for us lasted about twenty-four hours; it became a fairly typical sibling rivalry thereafter. In December 1976, we adopted a little girl, Kelly. I drew closer to her than anyone else in the family because I felt like she was an outsider just like me. I also had what was for me a close relationship with my adoptive Mom; but that was just about it.

I had an extremely immature personality, of which some my peers had little tolerance. Because no one knew about my Autism back then, many assumed was a result of having been on the seizure medications earlier in my life. Others believed that I knew exactly what I was doing and so if did not like how I was being treated, I was smart enough to figure out why I was being treated the way I was and stop acting that way. Therefore, I was tease and bullied from third grade through high school. During recess, I was the one no body wanted on their team. When I did play, no one would throw me the ball. In fact, the other team wouldn't waste a player to cover me. The slightest miscue on my part resulted in ridicule. When I was in my early 20s, a question was asked to everyone at a college and career social. “What was your funniest embarrassing moment?” It is a question that I could not answer because none of my embarrassing moments were the least bit funny. On the contrary, they were all bitterly painful.

In the fall of 1978, at the age of 9, I began to contemplate what death would be like. I recognize this

---

<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:28-30

as the first seeds of suicide that Satan planted in me. By the age of eleven, I started to wonder if I could actually bring myself to take my own life. These thoughts came at increasing and even regular occurrences over the next three years. By the time I was fourteen, I did have some desire to try it. This desire was fueled by my low self-esteem and the question, "Why am I alive?" By that time I had thought of about a half a dozen ways to try it. On Monday night, August 4, 1983, Pastor Richard Carlson was invited over to our house to talk to my brother and I. We both accepted Christ as Lord and Savior that night.

I became a zealous Christian who in time became very self-righteous, judgmental and critical. However, I still had my immature personality to deal with and still did not realize it. I also still had a very low self-esteem and was an underachiever in school. This prompted the doomsday prophecy that my eighth grade Vice Principle made about me. I was, "a waste of taxpayers' money to try to educate." I would, "drop out of high school and would be in and out of correctional institutions before I was twenty-one." I would, "never hold a job." And that I would, "be a burden on society." All of these compelled me to choose to be a closet Christian at school because I honestly believed that I would ruin God's reputation. I imagined that my peers would not want anything to do with a God that had a losers like me in his family.

In February 1986, my adoptive parents separated for the last time. Although it got a bit messy at times, their divorce was finalized in October of that year. My Mom and I arrived at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix, Arizona, about a month and a half later. We moved in with my Grandma, Great Uncle and my brother who all lived in the city of Mesa. Sean had moved down there right after he had graduated from high school a year and a half earlier. Shortly afterwards, my Mom and I heard about Gospel Echoes Church (which changed its name to Word of Grace Church in 1987).

Our first week then Gospel Echoes, we saw an advertisement in the bulletin about New Wine. It was a Christ centered, twelve-step program for people with addictions. We decided to attend in order to figure out how we could help Sean with his drug problems. I attended the "young adults" group (ages 16-21). That night was the first time that I ever admitted to having resentments towards anyone. That just was not a Christian thing to do. For the next seventeen months after that, I did little more in the area of my own personal recovery. I did not believe that there was much from which I had to recover. I did learn a lot about people and recovery during that time; but only so I could be more affective at working other peoples' programs.

In May 1989, I was finally reunited with my biological family. The ups and downs of them coming back into my life are beyond the scope of this book. I will say that in spite of all of the issues, which are for the most part no different than for any other family, I am glad that we are together again. It was also when I started to consider the possibility that I really was co-dependent.

### **MY CO-DEPENDENCY DENIAL YEARS**

My Adoptive Mom had been confronting me on this issue for the almost a year and a half. My chief justification was that co-dependence was a woman's issue. Men had real issues like drugs and alcohol. But a physical altercation between two friends of mine that affected me for three days caused me to reconsider this belief. I could not sufficiently validate this at the time, so I went right back in to denial.

My downward spiral of my adult life, which was typical for undiagnosed Autistics, started around November of that year. I believe that a major element of it was me having what would amount to co-dependent withdrawal. From June 1988, through September 1989, I attended a government funded, vocational training school called *Phoenix JobCorps*. It taught job skills to low-income individuals between the ages 16 to 21. It was estimated that 3/4 of them did not have a high school diploma. A lot of the students there had made a mess of their lives and wanted a break. This seemed to include

just about everybody in the dorm except me.

What a co-dependent's delight, 200 peers who needed me to fix them! I immediately started a Bible study on campus and being a living witness to all those around me. I know that God was able to use me to help some of them; but my belief that I (as the only vocal Christian on campus) was their only hope to find God was pure pride. This became the perfect place in which to drown my insecurities in. However, they began to surface like never before within two months of my completion of JobCorps.

I had gone from someone that many look to for spiritual guidance to just another member of our Sunday school class. But I felt less than that, I felt like I was the "baby brother" of the group. After all I was the only one who seemed to be struggling with any personal issues of any kind. I also had to borrow money from time to time in order to go out to lunch with them after service, but no one ever needed to borrow anything from me. I felt like I was just a nuisance to them. I was always receiving, but never giving.

My inability to hold a job as a carpenter, in spite of my 15 months of training at JobCorps, was typical for undiagnosed Autistics. The main Autism related issue that sabotaged my carpentry career, my manual dexterity, was just way to sub-par for the industry. To make matters worst, the whole reason I took carpentry was so I could have a useful skill to use as a third world missionary. However, my finances just kept getting worse and worse. All of my hopes and dreams seemed to be in vain.

By March 1990, I was out of carpentry and working as a drive for Domino's Pizza. It did not take long for my 15-year-old car to start showing wear and tear. When it would break down, I would have no choice but to ask someone for help. One of these close friends (who I will refer to as "Graduate") graduated from A.S.U. that May. Several of our mutual friends planned to go out somewhere afterwards. But that day we had a late rush that kept me from being able to go as early as my employer had said that I could. I raced home just as soon as they released me. I got home, change out of my uniform and into regular clothes, and then raced out the door. Just as I pulled on to the campus, I realized that I had forgotten my wallet. The thought that I was going to have to once again borrow money gave me a sinking feeling inside. This turned to anger as I determined that I would not borrow money this time, I would just ask for water.

However, when we went out, Graduate's roommate (who I will refer to as "Welcoming Committee," because her extravert personality made her a one-woman welcoming committee to our Collage and Career Group) would have nothing of that. She insisted that I let her buy me something. I finally relented and ordered the cheapest item on the menu. After the waitress left, I tried to explain that for me to always receiving and never giving was causing me to be depressed. Welcoming Committee's response, although well-meaning to make me feel better, had the exact opposite effect. As a result of this incident, I vowed to never again accept help of any kind from anyone who would not give me the opportunity to help them back. I remembered how I was able to help so many people in New Wine before, and concluded that it would be the perfect place for me to get help now. It was the only place I knew that I could give help while receiving help.

That Monday night, I went back to New Wine for the first time in two years. I grabbed one of everything from the literature table that night. These included several different lists of characteristics of alcoholism, adult children of dysfunctional families, co-dependents, etc. That week I got out a highlighter and marked all of the characteristics that applied. I did not even take the time to look at the top to see what each list was about. On one of these lists I highlighted seven out of ten characteristics listed. I also noted that two of the remaining three were issues that I knew I had dealt with in the past. I thought to myself that this list was definitely me. Then I noticed the title of the handout: Ten Traits of Co-Dependency. What?! This is not me; co-dependency is a woman's issue and I am a man. I came to the realization during my second week that I did not really know why I was even going. After all, I told myself, I did not have any real problems. So decided to just go ahead and

drop out.

I had car problems that week (something that had become a regular occurrence with my job at Domino's Pizza). I called my brother from out of town and he gave me some suggestions; but my car was stranded along ways away. I would need a ride there. That Sunday, Graduate and Welcoming Committee said that they would gladly help me out. Still determined to not receive something unless I could do something good back in return, I offered to take them out to lunch the following Sunday, and they accepted.

The next Sunday, we got a surprise visit from an out of town married couple who were friends of ours. The guy told me that they were taking Graduate and Welcoming Committee out to lunch. I assumed that they had already confirmed this with them. I was hurt that they would shelf the time with me in favor of time with these friends who just showed up without notice and essentially canceled my plan. My friendship just was not as important to them. During service, I sat by myself and sulked. As soon as service was over, I left without saying a word to anybody.

Shortly after I got home, I received a phone call, it was Welcoming Committee. She asked, "What happened to you? We were all ready to go out to lunch with you and you just left without saying anything." I told her that the one friend told me that they would be taking the two of them out to lunch and so that canceled our plans. "No," she said. They had not yet discussed it with each other. And when he did bring it up to them, they told them that they could not go with them that afternoon because they already had plans to go to lunch with me.

I felt like an idiot, but I was too proud to admit that I jumped to conclusion. I cut short the call and remained in turmoil for the rest of the day. Why did I act this way towards my two friends? That night I talked to my Mom about it. She explained to me that it was unhealthy for me to need to repay everybody for every good deed done for me. I was not doing it out of gratitude; I was doing it to receive approval. And that was textbook co-dependency! I finally put my stereotypes aside and looked at the facts. As my future sponsor would later tell me on many occasions, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, talks like a duck, acts like a duck, It must be a duck!" Before I left that night, my Mom lent me a book by Al Eills, *"One Way Relationships: When You Love Others More Than They Love You."* I have never felt more joy from reading the title of a book than I did then. At last, I thought, someone knows what I am going through.

It was not Graduate's or Welcoming Committee's fault for what happened. All though my life I had been an introvert who would become absorbed with one or two friendships at any given time. They were all I had, and I was just one of many. Such massive imbalances were a recipe for disaster in my life. Having one or two really close friends, along with a number of other friends, can be a good way to have our relational needs met. However, having only one or two friends period is not. Our relational needs are too great for one or two people to handle by themselves. God created us to ensure that we would reach out to each other instead of isolating ourselves. This is to reveal a part of his nature to us. He created us so he could have fellowship with us and he tries to show us this through our need for relationship with each other.

The next night I returned to New Wine again, but this time it was different. This time I knew that I had a serious problem, co-dependency. I saw the effects that it had on both my Christian walk as well as my relationship. I knew I needed to attack this problem with all I had, and I did! The 12 steps definitely helped me improve in every problem area that I could identify. The only problem was; my Autism, which was manifesting in codependent behavior and social interaction, still had not been identified. So although my codependency was being dealt with, my undiagnosed Autism continued to wreak havoc in my life, especially the typical Autistic struggles of developing romantic relationships and maintain employment.

### **MY PRE-DIAGNOSIS ADULT FUTILITY**

The 20 years from time I completed my Job Corp training until I was identified as an Autistic was a rollercoaster. I would get a job and do my best to be the best employee possible, then I would either quit or lose my job due to poor work performance or because I simply did not like the way I was treated. In cases in which I quit because of how I was treated, the offending individual was usually someone who was a jerk to everybody. Therefore, I cannot say that I was being singled out in any specific incident that comes to mind. I was simply guided, especially throughout my 20s, by a utopian delusion that there was the perfect job somewhere out there where everyone was nice to each other. This unrealistic view of life, coupled with a hypersensitivity to stress, were definitely aspects of my undiagnosed Autism that caused a lot of my employment issues. I will go into more detail about what all of these issues were in Chapter 12, *Autistic Success Over the "Accumulative" Issues*.

In my personal life, I was received plenty of affirmation from a lot of ladies for being a nice guy, but none of them were interested in a relationship with me for reasons that none of them could explain. No matter how highly regarded I was as a devout Christian who could be counted on to step up and volunteer when need, I could not convince anyone to support my own visions for ministry opportunities that I saw presented to myself. I saw myself as someone who did not want to sit around and do nothing to solve problems that I clearly saw before my eyes, just because those who were supposed to be in leadership were not able to get organized for various reasons. However, I could not get anyone to follow my lead, resulting in me having many short-term successes that eventually fizzled out due to a lack of support.

This dilemma caused me to come up with a pre-diagnosis allegory for who I was: "Everyone knows you cannot fit a round peg into in to a square whole, but what do you do with a triangle peg?" After I was diagnosed and started reading the Autism literature available to me online, I pictured an "Autism Asterisk" that had been plaguing me my whole life. It told everyone around me that no matter how good I was; I was simply deficient in ways they could not explain. After networking with the local Autistic community, I learned that many of us feel that we were born on the wrong planet.

### **MY SUICIDAL THOUGHTS THROUGHOUT MY ADULTHOOD, IN SPITE OF BEING A CHRISTIAN**

Throughout this 20-year span, I would consider suicide from time to time when I would just run out of ideas to hope and dream about. Most of the time, it would occur to me that doing so would be a sin that I, as a good Christian, could never do. So instead, I would dwell on the hope that maybe I could get killed while crossing the road or something else. I just wanted to die in a way that God would not have a problem with. However, there were two exceptions in which I seriously considered taking my own life.

The first of these situations occurred in June 1999. In April of that year, my church, Covenant of Grace Christian Fellowship, Phoenix, Arizona, USA, invented a live-in position for me in order to prevent me from becoming homeless. To summarize what had led up to that point, I had dug a hole for myself with irresponsible spending when I was employed. A bad roommate who did not pay his share of the bills, eventually leading to our eviction, was the last straw that pushed me into that hole. When this favor by my church lasted longer than the month or two that was originally expect, I began to get extremely depressed after I had lost another job. I was volunteering to help teach English to refugees two nights a week, and they were better off than I was. I just ran out of ideas of what to do with my life.

As I laid in bed one night in the large storage room that had been cleared out so I could use it as my privet living quarters, I thought seriously about taking my own life. However, I reasoned that I could not do it until after I fulfilled my commitment to doing Vacation Bible School. After all, I had made a commitment to the kids, and I could not let them down. At that time, a surge of sanity hit me from

seemingly nowhere as I realized the magnitude of my entire thought process. At that time, the chorus of a Michael W. Smith song, *The Last Letter*, came to my mind. The song was about a young man on “the edge of 17,” who just wrote a suicide letter. Aside from the fact that I had just turn 30, and that that the song had been written in 1986, the verses of that song could have been written by me that very night expressing exactly what I felt at the time. The chorus was a desperate plea for the young man, as well as anyone else listening to the song, to not go through with it:

Well, I've got to tell you there's another way  
 To be free - to be complete  
 But, you've got to make it thru another day  
 And deny your own defeat  
 (Don't give in)  
 And I'm here to tell you there's another way  
 To consume a hungry heart  
 (First Course) All you need is just a prayer away  
 (Remaining 2 Courses) Jesus is waiting just a prayer away  
 Let it in to where you are

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9QCH0t9nvl>

One of the first things I did to bounce back that night and to focus on something constructive was to buy a computer so I could resume writing a book call, *The Handbook of Christian Discipleship Recovery*, which I had started writing several years earlier. When one of my church friends questioned why I had spent what little money I had on that, I told her that pursuing a vain dream is better than pursuing no dream at all. I am sure she realized that was a loaded statement, but I am not sure if she had any idea just how loaded it was.

### **MY PATH TO FINALLY GETTING MY DIAGNOSIS**

April 2009, a couple of months after my biological mom recognized my Autism as the result of a LPN in service that she attended, and about a couple of months before I was officially diagnosed. I just start my application process for SSI, which was one of the most degrading experiences of my life. Not only did it go completely against the work ethic that I was taught to abide by, but I also viewed it as an official declaration that my eighth grade Vice Principle was right all along. I was now resigning to becoming what I felt was me being a “ward of the state,” and therefore a total burden upon society.

Compounding all of this, my quest for answers about Autism resulted in more confusion. I was going through all of the links that I could find about Autism with Google and found so many contradictory concepts on the subject. There were *SOME* who believe that Aspies/“High Functioning Autistics” should be separated from the “Low Functioning Autistics,” which is completely different than what the new DSM V has done. *SOME* believed that ADD/ADHD was an aspect of Autism and therefore anyone with these diagnoses should be diagnosed as Autistic, yet the majority of “experts” do not buy into this notion. As I poured over all of this, the thought crossed my mind, “If all of these experts cannot figure us out, what chance do I have?”

At this time, I was a member of First Arabic Baptist Church, Phoenix, Arizona, USA, and would volunteer to do whatever needed to be done. We had a troupe of an Evangelist and accompanying musicians come from California for a special meeting. The pastor asked me to take his car to pick up some cases of bottled water at the store, before going and picking up members who wanted to attend. Somehow, I lost the Pastor’s car keys somewhere between the store and his car. In so doing, I caused so much disruption that I almost single handedly wrecked the entire event.

I went home that night, feeling completely humiliated, and never wanting to show my face to them again. Compounding that was the prediction of my eighth grade vice principle playing over and over again in my mind that I would be a “burn upon society,” which would be proven to be true once and for all when I officially accepted for SSI. Add to that the uncertainty that I would even be accepted, and what would I do if I did not get accepted. All of this created a complete sense of powerlessness that comes from knowing that your future lies in the hand of those who are not just strangers, but government bureaucrats. Is it any wonder that I thought about jumping headfirst off my second story balcony?

The course that sustained me through that night was from a song by the Christian group, “Avalon,” titled, “Dreams I Dream For You.”

The dreams I dream for you  
 Are deeper than the ones you're clinging to  
 More precious than the finest thing you knew  
 And truer than the treasures our pursue  
 Let the olds dreams die  
 Like stars that fade from view  
 Then take the cup I offer  
 And drink deeply of  
 The dreams I dream for you

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-w\\_Car6634](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-w_Car6634)

My initial response to this chorus going over and over in my head was to reject it because of the inherent uncertainty that it suggested was in store for my life. It seemed to suggest that the work that I had been trying to do with the refugee community for the previous 10 years, and the subsequent plans that I had for the future, would amount to nothing. It meant that my ministry them would be added to the ever-grown list of failed project that had been growing my entire life.

However, I was compelled to turn on my computer and play it off of my hard drive. The song, in its totality, spoke of someone enduring the very life crisis that I was in at the time. It offered me hope; I just did not want the solution that it was suggesting. So I focused on that hope, until circumstance led me down a path to where I embraced the solution.

### TIMELINE OF MY DIAGNOSIS TO FIRST CONFERENCE YEARS

**Summer 2009:** SSI had me test for Autism in order to determine my eligibility for benefits.

**September 2009:** at the encouragement of a New Wine facilitator, I started attending an Autistic/Aspie support group lead by Sue Golubock and Tara Marshal.

**February 2010:** I left First Arabic Baptist and returned to Covenant of Grace with the intent of reviving the refugee ministry that I once had and was still unwilling to let go.

**March 2010:** I attend my first Autism conference. My resulting observations about the Autistic and Autism communities as a whole compelled me to focus on the needs of my fellow Autistics.

**April 2010:** After having privet consultations with Sue, Tara and Sam Bartlow (one year after considering jumping head first off my second floor balcony); I put out a call to the main group for us to organize a local chapter of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network. I also announced our intentions to try and hold our own conference that July so we could discuss the issue that was most important to us. I was unsuccessful in getting anyone on board to having a conference that soon.

**May 2010:** After discussions with my Pastor's wife, it was agreed that Covenant of Grace would do whatever it could to support my ministry by making the church facilities available for regular meetings

and conference. However, the church's resources were so stretched that we would have to do all of the work ourselves to make things happen.

I announce my intention to start training Autistics to self-advocate. It also became clear as a result of that meeting that there were major ideological differences between those who believe that THE solution to our grievances was found in political advocacy, and myself who wanted to engage in face-to-face, constructive dialog with parents and teachers.

**October 2010:** After months of discussion, *Covenant of Grace* formally pledged its support of the Autism community by backing my establishing of, "The Autism Ambassadors Corps." The mission of the AAC was to, "...bring the entire autism community together in constructive dialog in order that all sides can obtain mutual understanding and admiration for each other."

**January 2011:** I gave my first full length presentation on the subject the science of Autism to my Autistic/Aspie support group. My Pastor and his wife attended so I could demonstrate to them the level of expertise that I had gained in the approximately year and a half since I had been diagnosed.

**April 2011:** Two years after considering jumping headfirst off my second-floor balcony, I organized and hosted the first of the annual conferences at my church in collation with Autism Awareness Month. I hosted and hosted them for 3 consecutive years.

### MY GROOMING AS AN AUTISTIC SELF-ADVOCATE

The Saturday before the above mentioned, Sue included a one sentence explanation about what is so uniquely different about the neurology of Autistics during a presentation at our monthly meeting. My 12-step background then kicked in, realizing that she had just provided the root level understanding of Autism necessary to why we have the tendency that we do. Furthermore, it also opened the door for the possible development of countermeasure that can improve the quality of our lives.

I spent the next year using deductive reasoning to combine this root level scientific understanding of Autism, common knowledge understanding human development and phycology, historic examples of "late bloomers" and the personal testimonies of the group's other members. Over time, I came to the following bottom line conclusions about Autism:

1. Just because an Autistic is "low functioning" at birth, does not mean they are condemned to be that way for the rest of their lives. Many of the struggles that they might have early in their lives may lessen, or may be alleviated altogether, over time.
2. Many Autistics exceed everyone's expectations for them. This ranges from the Autistic overcoming many their personal struggles, to achieving their personal goals in life.
3. Along with early interventions, as well as other therapies and treatments, many Autistics can improve the quality of their lives by developing coping mechanisms and improving their decision-making process.

In May of 2011, Dr. Woodruff found Sue and I though the internet and made contact with both of us. He accepted my invitation to attend my weekly Autism meeting, to which only he and I showed up. Nevertheless, I jumped at the opportunity to have an actual neurologist critique my material, so I emailed it to him in advance. When I asked him what he thought, it was obvious that he did not want to hurt my feelings. So I came right out and told him that I wanted to learn and that if there was a problem with my material I wanted him to tell me.

Dr. Woodruff and I spent that night having an in depth one on one session where he set me straight on my understanding of neuroscience and the unique neurology of Autism. By the end of the night, I had a rock-solid neuroscientific basis for the bottom-line conclusions that I had been advocating for

the previous year. Since then, he, Sue and Tara have continued to develop my understanding of as many aspects of Autism as possible.

### MY QUEST FOR THE RESTORATION OF MY DIGNITY

By 2012, I finally understood myself well enough to know what career path I should've taken right out of high school, that of a special ed. teacher. However, taking on that much student debt at the age of 43 didn't seem wise to me. I also wanted to turn the Autism Ambassadors Corps in to a full fledged non-profit organization so I could be a full-time advocate that could educate others about Autism.

The first step in that path was to volunteer to work in a special ed classroom at the school just up the street from me, hoping that it could eventually turn in to a paid position as a par-professional (assistant teacher). This was something I did during my last year and a half, from February 1987 – May 1988 at Parkway Elementary School. Prior to Article 9 integrating students of Arizona Public Schools who had disabilities into mainstream schools, starting in the '89-'90 school year, it was the school that all such students were bused to who attended Mesa Public Schools. So I knew exactly what was expected of volunteers and assistant teachers, and that I could meet all of them.

However, I was never given the opportunity to do what I went there to do. Although I understand the Special Services Specialist starting me out as a library assistant to see how I'd do, I did make it very clear to her what my goals were. After 13 months of making excuses of why I couldn't be placed in a special ed class, and all the circumstances that were the basis for all of last year's excuses were coming around again, it became clear that I was never going to be given the opportunity that I was looking for. When I appealed to the leaders of the Autism groups to mediate on my behalf, they automatically assume that the school was undoubtedly in the right. When I tried to rally my fellow Autistics to my side, including those who profess to be Autistic Self-Advocates, they just shrugged it off as a fact of life for us that we can't change.

The first of two main problems that undermined that plan, as well as every other plan that I had for regaining my financial independence between 2012 – 2018, was institutional discrimination. Basically, the Autism "experts" present a deficit-based understanding of Autism that cause people to be afraid of us and/or for us, especially our parents and those who work professionally with us and therefore are the most knowledgeable about all of our problems. The notion that there are jobs that we are so perfectly suited for that we would require little or no accommodations if we were given a chance to work them, as well as Autistics mentoring other Autistics, is such a foreign concept to everyone that has any interaction with the Autism community.

The second main problem is the notion that because Autism is defined by our social difficulties, and conflict that we have is automatically our fault. This discriminatory mindset is reinforced by the Job Accommodation Network, which "is a service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S. Department of Labor."<sup>1</sup> Those actually responsible for writing the packet on Autism are include the three largest Autism organizations in the US (Autism Society of America, Autism Speaks, and National Autism Association), as well as the largest Autistic Self-Advocacy organization in the US (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network). My summation of their tips on dealing with social skills on page 8, if an Autistic has a conflict with a coworker, do everything to help him or her to understand why it was their fault and teach them how to do better in the future, then help their coworker to understand that the Autistic can't help themselves.

I later had this same assumption of the Autistic is always to blame when attending a school to learn to become a physical therapy tech in 2015, as well as members of the Arizona State Legislature that took the Autism organization campaign contributions and voting block over my visionary ideas for

---

<sup>1</sup> Accommodations and Compliance Series: Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorder

improving the quality of life of Autistics. My plan for “Getting Autistics/Aspies Jobs and Off Public Assistance” offered us the opportunity for those of us to wanted to be independent of public assistance the opportunity to do so, which would save taxpayers money that could be either diverted to other spending needs or cut from the budget all together. I presented these ideas to them in 2015 and 2018, which got me nothing but lip service pats on the back.

### **MY PATH TO REGAINING MY INDEPENDENCE**

To read all about this, please read the 5-page commentary I wrote with this same name. Here is the bullet points of what happened:

- ❖ **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
- ❖ **Beacon Group (January – November 2018):** Provides employment services. My case worker...
  - ...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.
- ❖ **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. This enabled me to “reinvent my job history.”
- ❖ **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.

### **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>1</sup> by United Cerebral Palsy in early April, I started driving for DoorDash which providing me with enough income to sustain me through this setback. In early May, UCP gain 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> Meaning that they put me right back to work just as soon as it’s safe to do so.