



Profile of Kristian Hooker

Director, Autism Society Canada Board of Directors

First, let me say that there is no universal “guide” to autism. There are countless differing degrees of autism and different kinds of autism spectrum disorders (ASD). To truly get a universal understanding of autism, you’d have to talk to thousands of individuals and families. That is my understanding.

At age one and a half I started showing signs of autism. I would stop talking, wouldn’t give eye contact to anyone and I developed an unusual fear of balloons, phones, live singing and grass, to name just a few things. Then at age two and a half, I was diagnosed with autism. I was told about it when I was in grade six. I had known that something was different about me, but could never quite figure out what it was. When I was told that I had autism, a whole bunch of questions were answered.

I understand that many people with autism spectrum disorder remember feeling isolated and completely alone growing up, but I honestly don’t remember feeling that way. I had a supportive group of friends to hang around with in public school, many of whom I also saw away from school and in other social environments.

During my teen years I was able to meet other teens and kids with ASD through the resource department at my high school. I was also involved in various music programs and made many friends there. I don’t think I had any problems during my school years that stood out from anything any of the other students were dealing with. Balancing personal time with schoolwork and extra curricular activities, not giving into peer pressures – everyone in high school endures these pressures. My friends and teachers were supportive when the going got tough. I also did some volunteer work at the schools where my mother worked and took a career and business course in high school and a para-educator course in college.

I was always fascinated with the new things I was learning, whether it was a lesson in the classroom or a new life skill. One of the most important things I’ve learned is how to hide my weaknesses and how to make the most of my talents and abilities. A good example of using my skills to the best of my abilities would be in music. I have always had a good sense of timing, so I made use of this by becoming a percussionist in many high school bands.

I feel that I can interact well one to one and with other people in social situations. I might still have stim (self-stimulation) issues such as mind wandering and a hand flickering gesture, but I’ve been able to refrain from doing this in public and try to do it in the privacy of my house. That eliminates the biggest challenge I have in the social world.

A big problem facing people with ASD in society is that others often have this stereotype of how a person with ASD is supposed to look or behave. Many people with ASD could eliminate this stereotype but rarely get that opportunity, especially with a large group of people. The one thing that people should realize about individuals with ASD is that we are really no different than anyone else. We may have something that makes us seem unique or different, but so do you.

Lately, there have been a lot of self-advocacy groups and organizations on autism coming forward and speaking up about what it means to have autism. I think that's a good thing. Nothing creates self-empowerment better than standing up for what you believe in. Nothing gives more hope to others than fighting for those who may not yet be able to fight for themselves.

Leaving the school world and joining the adult world was quite a challenge for me at first. My parents played a big part in this transition, helping me enroll in Red River College (Winnipeg, Manitoba) and helping me find a job through our local employment centre. They have been very supportive in everything I do. I still live with my parents and don't have immediate plans to move out. There's a good chance that in a couple of years (or possibly sooner), I may move into an apartment but I would like to go back to college first and study computer animation so that I can make enough money to afford a place. Since I haven't really pursued independent living, I haven't yet looked into any possible living supports.

I feel very fortunate that I have been able to accomplish what I have accomplished in my life. Not many people travel to New York and receive an International Achievement Award, join the Board of Directors of Autism Society Canada and become chair of ASC's Advisory Committee of people with ASD, all by the age of twenty-one. However, I could not possibly claim to have done all this by myself. I could write ten more pages just thanking everyone who has ever helped me or supported me along the way. I want specifically to thank my parents and my brother for being the most supportive – they have never allowed quitting as an option for me. I do have to admit that a good portion of my self-motivation has been to prove the experts – who said I might not amount to anything in life – wrong.