

THE VOICE OF AUTISM

What does it take to be the voice of Autism? What must one possess in order to be that voice? Could I be that voice?

In the fall of 1989 at the age of 17 I was diagnosed as being in the Autism Spectrum Disorder. This was early in my senior year of high school. My parents couldn't figure out my problems with my behavior as a kid. Since my diagnosis I tried living a normal life while living with my parents. I worked and went to a community college. While I was in college, I joined a non-commercial radio station. I worked really hard to help turn the station around. I took over the Country/Folk/Bluegrass format and worked at building up the music library. I later hosted and produced for three years the station's first ever live & local Country/Folk/Bluegrass show after not having one for that station's first nine years of existence. I later did news as the station's second person to hold the position of news director and later senior news anchor. I also started a charity bowling event. I also was the recipient of a total of ten broadcasting awards, which was the most that anyone has ever received. All of that came to an end on December 13th, 2000 after more than seven years. I just wanted to move on to bigger and better things.

I had my first taste of independence in April of 2001 after I accepted my dream job as a radio broadcaster. It was in Tawas City, MI. The apartment that I lived in was only 4 ½ miles away from work. There were times were I felt the sadness and loneliness because I couldn't take my cats with me. The apartment that I lived in didn't allow pets and I wouldn't be able to take care of them. I also couldn't visit my parents as often as I could. The job, however, lasted only nine months. I was also working a second job at a grocery store to supplement my income. I later move to the Alpena area after taking a job as a news anchor & reporter at another radio station. That job paid more money, but only lasted about 4 ½ months. I move back with my parents briefly after accepting a job as a cashier at Detroit Metro Airport in Romulus and move into an apartment with my brother in July of 2003. For my second job, I work at a radio station in Ann Arbor, MI. I lose the job after about 2 ½ years because the station was going through changes. I started to get depressed leading into October of 2006 when I lost the cashier's job at Detroit Metro Airport. I was afraid of telling my parents or my brother because I was afraid of getting yelled at. I would pretend to go to work and go to hotel, store, and restaurant parking lots and sleep in my vehicle. I would borrow large sums of money from NetCash and CashCall. I would try to work jobs that paid large amounts of commission to pay off the debt quickly. It call came to a head on the day after Super Bowl Sunday 2007. I received a call from CashCall saying that I had a payment to make but I didn't have the money. My brother overheard the conversation and was irate. After a physical altercation, I made a threat to take my own life. I was taken in handcuffs to a hospital in Trenton, MI and was transferred to a hospital in Madison Heights, MI where I stayed for a week. It was then that I received the diagnosis of Severe Asperger's Syndrome, a mild and high-functioning form of autism. I spend the next 14 years living with my parents.

For about seven of those years I went through therapy and case management trying to get back into work. After about 20 months of being unemployed, I being work as a security guard. The job wasn't all that glamorous. It was the longest time that I ever had: Nine years. I leave the security business in late May of 2017 and tried my hand working in a call center making calls to customer to set appointments and provide leads to powersports dealerships. That job, however, was through an employment agency which is something that I frown upon. The job, however, only lasted about six months. I was told that I sounded too forceful when trying to schedule appointments. I avoided filing for unemployment benefits for a while because I was a little depressed. In April of 2018 I was hired as a junior clerk for the city of Melvindale. The job only lasted about eight weeks. In July of 2019 I start working at Kroger in West Dearborn as a cashier. I worked for Kroger from July 1990 to 1996 as a courtesy clerk. The schedule was really erratic. In June of 2019 I began working for Automated Media, Inc. as a General Motors Tire Specialist. After working for the company for about 18 months, I was able to afford to regain my independence and move into an apartment in Plymouth, MI. In the days leading up to my move, I was going through déjà vu all over again: Sadness and loneliness. I'm afraid that it could worsen.

In 2009 I began taking a voice-over class at the Dearborn Heights campus of Henry Ford Community College from Heather Costa of Such-A-Voice. After the class, I started up my voice-over business Voice II Media (read as Voice Two Media). My first voice-over project came in February of 2012. It was a 10-second tag for a set of three one-minute videos for Autism Speaks. I was paid a heavy-sounding \$500.00 for that one 10-second tag. Several years afterwards I started doing projects for WMUR TV-9, an ABC affiliate in Manchester, NH. I also did projects for KPVM TV-25 & KACP 103.1 FM of Pahrump, NV, and KYTX TV-19, a CBS affiliate in Tyler, TX.

Okay...I know that you've read enough about my life story. You want me to get to the issue at hand. For more than a decade I've been recording public service announcements about autism awareness and have been sending them to non-commercial radio stations. I start with WHFR 89.3 FM and other radio stations in the metro Detroit area. I then go statewide and now it's nationwide. I record in early March. Two sets are recorded. One set is "Light It Up Blue" which promotes Autism Awareness Month in April. The second set is about Autism Awareness Month. I've recorded more than **200** PSAs.

I've also written editorials about Autism Awareness that have been published in local newspapers. The first was in 2014 and was called "Autism Awareness Month: It's Starting to Get Serious". It was published in the Dearborn Press & Guide. In 2016 I wrote one called "Autism Awareness Month: The **WORST** Is Yet To Come". It was published in five newspapers. I've talked to Devin Scillian, a news anchor for Detroit NBC affiliate WDIV TV-4, and have known him since September of 1996. He has a nephew who was diagnosed with autism. He told me that I shouldn't be surprised by the number of newspapers that published my editorial because autism is a serious issue. I've had two of my editorials published in The Detroit News. I find that to be lucky. I've written a four-part series that was published in the Dearborn Times-Herald called "Patience Is A Virtue". The series was about dealing with autism at home, in school, on the job, and with law enforcement. I also wrote a two-part series called "Don't Turn Your Back".

My next step on being the voice of autism was to visit Lansing, MI in April of 2020 to address the Michigan Legislature about adults with autism. The reason why I focus on adults is that I feel that they're being neglected. I spoke with Abdullah Hammoud (D) of the 15th District and Senator Sylvia Santana (D). I recorded a presentation about adults with autism. The hopes for the trip to Lansing was put on hold with the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). I'm still hoping to go to Lansing to make my case. I'm hoping to meet with my Senator Rosemary Bayer about it.

This goes to show you that it takes more than recording PSAs and writing editorials about a cause that you care about. I was called an advocate because of the PSAs and the editorials. I, however, seriously doubt that. The real advocates, in my opinion, are those who work in the mental health facilities and help those who don't have a voice or don't use it. They also are the ones who should stand beside them at job interviews. It's getting to the point where I'm becoming more of a voice for those who are in the Autism Spectrum Disorder.

If you're in the Autism Spectrum Disorder or if you know anyone in that condition, here are some words of wisdom to live by: Think of yourself as a 16-pound bowling ball and the ten pins 60 feet away as Autism or Asperger's Syndrome. Now you go figure **that** one out.