

My Experience at Centering On Children

By Jeffrey DeCristofaro

In January 2015, more than half a year before turning 30, and following my termination as an early morning stock boy at Target, I started my next part-time job as a production assistant at a place that I wished existed back in my childhood to provide me with the kind of help I needed... as an individual on the Spectrum.

My first diagnosis as an Autistic was at the age of five in 1990, when I was labeled, following early signs of autism at age four, under the condition Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). The doctor giving the diagnosis said that I was “trainable, but not teachable.” This would be followed more than two decades later, following my termination at Target, with both a self-diagnosis and a more reliable professional diagnosis labeling me as one with “Asperger’s Syndrome”, later changed to “Autism with Preserved Intellect.” In the interim, during my transition from childhood to young adulthood, my parents were trying to mainstream me with the neurotypical majority and its activities, even going so far as to homeschool me right through the end of high school prior to my college years at the University of North Carolina – Asheville, where I would spend seven and a half years to get both my Bachelor of Arts and Master’s Degree. (I had to take several umbrella curriculums, along with a few dual-enrollment courses at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Institute to help acclimatize me with a public education setting.)

Before finally obtaining my Master’s, I started taking part-time work, beginning with occasional media projection gigs for local film festivals held within and outside my alma mater, and then later my aforementioned Target job. When I was fired, I was shocked – and it was only when I later discovered that I was autistic that I was further depressed. I knew that there was something wrong with me, but I didn’t know what, primarily because for a long time I wasn’t even told that I was on the Spectrum to begin with and my parents wanted me to be a part of normal society. I already had other disabilities like language-processing disorder (for which I needed occasional visits from a speech pathologist), anxiety disorder and even Hypothalamic Hypothyroidism (which was and still remains more severe and for which I always need medication), but I In any case, research on the subject of Autism was gradually advancing during my coming of age and it wasn’t until much later that the Spectrum was better explained and understood by the public.

I spent time with people on the Spectrum in local groups, learning more from their experiences (most especially their skills and life struggles, including setbacks, traumas and occasional accomplishments), and began reading more about the subject from books by people like Temple Grandin. I also started attending a number of autism empowerment events and activities held locally (one of which, the 5K Run-Walk for Autism, is held annually by the NC Society for Autism – I have on occasion participated in that along with my boss and co-workers). While I felt glad that I wasn’t really alone, I also felt sad that I had gone on for so long without even knowing I was on the Spectrum to begin with, not to mention feeling lonely and wanting to find both meaning in my life. To this day I’m still single – companionship outside the family with someone who can accept me for who I am is what I value highly, and over the years I had – and still have – friendly acquaintances, but no real friends, let alone a girlfriend.

Once I was fired and discovered my level on the Spectrum as an “Aspie”, I spent the next two years searching for another job, often with help from a job coach. I tried looking for paid jobs that would fit my

special skills and interests – mostly photography, film, acting, modeling, writing - but those were few and far in between here in Asheville, and while I did build up a substantial resume of credits and published works as an actor, photographer, poet and online film essayist – not to mention volunteer work for a handful local events and non-profits like Manna Food Bank, OrganicFest, etc. – these weren't paid positions nor did they help get my foot through the door. Ironically, the one job I would get after being fired – as production assistant at COC – was one that my job coach didn't find for me. I actually first discovered it myself back in 2013 when I was job-hunting prior to receiving aid from my job coach.

At the time Centering on Children (aka Shoebox Tasks) was a pretty humble operation started by Ron and Linda Larsen. It was through a member of the local Aspies group and friend of Ron's, Julia Bramsen, that I was recommended for the job late in 2014 before I started in January the following year. Once I had done the orientation with my job coach's assistance, I was able to perform the assigned business tasks with a high degree of autonomy.

In the past nine years that I have worked on COC, the business has gone through quite a number of changes, namely in expansion, growing numbers of orders from both national and global clients, certain task kits being assembled, and several people who have worked here. But one thing that hasn't changed is the atmosphere. For the most part, the crew running *this* ship is very friendly, most especially founders Ron and Linda, their sons Nick and Adam, and our long-time Accounts Manager Sarah. They have been very supportive of me, and I have even used some of my skills as a photographer to contribute to their online media. Several local artists I even know have at least once done some part-time work here.

In rotating different positions as a production assistant – mostly packing and sealing the components of the task kits in the basic and advanced curriculums, but also filling up the peanut dispenser, hauling packages back and forth from the delivery dock on pallet jacks, checking inventory and more – I over time have come to more fully appreciate the true value behind the job. Although I do regret that I and many others like me didn't have a very productive educational system like this decades ago when we were children ages five and up, at the same time I'm grateful for its present existence, namely in those children on the Spectrum today, whether homeschooled or in public schools across the world, now can have something that will give them greater developmental aid. I've even recommended this business to several people I know who have children of their own on the Spectrum.

However long I currently stay at Centering On Children as a production assistant – and eventually I will move on to something else, whether along the same lines or much different - I certainly hope that this business for which I have contributed my services for nearly a decade will continue to exist, and that those who run it will continue to ensure that children on the Spectrum and school systems everywhere will have what they need. I can say for a fact that we *do* need more businesses and jobs like this that serve the noble cause of providing autistic youth of the new generation very early on with a system that has been proven to work and allows for far greater development than what people like me had as a child. Hopefully, there will be many out there that will follow our example.