

## CLAWS AND WINGS:

### AN ORAL HISTORY EXPLORATION OF DISABILITY IN DELAWARE 1917-2017

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Interviewer: Kim Burdick, MA, MPA (Referred to hereafter as KB)

Interviewee: Reese Eskridge (Referred to hereafter as RE), Advocate

Topics included: Asperger's Syndrome, Inclusion, Barriers

Run time: 50:11

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KB: So, our next speaker is Mr. Reese Eskridge. I'd like to ask Reese to tell me a little bit about your childhood and things that you felt made you different from other people in your family or your neighborhood.

RE: Well, going back to the early years, I grew up in Nashua, New Hampshire. I found out that I had pervasive developmental disorder, as my parents did, at a young age, around the age of 3. While we were living in Nashua, I did have a good time. I had gone to a couple of good schools, where the teachers were really supportive, classmates did not ridicule me or anything like that. I'm just gonna keep it brief.

I would say that the next stage of my life, when I moved to Lyndeborough, New Hampshire and attended a different school there, the times did change. I became the subject of bullying and academic hardship and I had to go through it all with very little support. I felt like I was chronically in survival mode every step of the way during that era. It was very rough. It took a physical and emotional toll on me, 'cause I went home with headaches almost every day by the time I got into 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Exclusion was the biggest problem I had followed by my academic struggles.

KB: So and then you moved back to Nashua. And then what?

RE: I moved back to Nashua and I did manage to get out of that school, of course, and I entered home schooling. While the bullying was over, my academic problems were not. Because my mother was my instructor, it's not like she specialized in a particular area of expertise and could easily help me to navigate through course contents. It was kind of a do-it-on-a-set-schedule basis without a lot of grounds for support.

KB: So, when did, how old were you when you came to Delaware?

RE: I was almost 14 when I moved to Delaware for the first time. I first moved to Smyrna, Delaware, and then in June of that same year I moved to Newark.

KB: So you were only in Smyrna for a little?

RE: I was for a few months. We lived in a rental house and then we had to settle first for more permanent residence in Newark.

KB: So what did you like to do when you a kid?

RE: I liked pretty much most of what the other kids liked. I liked to watch TV shows like "Pokemon" and "Rugrats" and other kids' shows that we all liked. That's the perk of being a '90s kid is you get to enjoy the original stuff, the best kind of animated series on TV. Seriously, in this day and age there's not much good on! [Laughs]

Anyway, I also enjoyed other games, too, like board games and video games. I remember I had the original Playstation system and played with my dad sometimes. I'm not gonna go into too much detail about that, but, the point is, I did enjoy most of what other kids liked. And what I really wanted was inclusion in those activities. And I had a couple of close friends when I lived in Nashua the first time around who were willing to do pretty much anything with me and we always had a blast.

KB: Do you ever see them anymore, like keep in touch?

RE: Not with them. I mean, there is one person I only minorly keep in touch with nowadays. He used to be my friend in preschool. We graduated from preschool the same year, same month, really, the summer of 1998.

KB: So maybe you're friends for life, probably.

RE: He is a lifelong friend because there's no way we could become enemies. We have a lot in common, and, our, the nature of our interactions has never gotten old. That's a great thing. That's how you know that you have a dedicated, lifelong friend.

KB: So at some point, I guess when you were in Newark, you became the Prom King?

RE: [Laughs] I'll tell you a little bit of the backstory about that! In my junior year, I didn't go to junior prom, or any prom. In my senior year, I, that's when the year I decided, "You know what? I think I should go to these events because it's my last chance." I went to homecoming. I went to dances. I also went to prom, of course, and I remember I had one rough situation with a teacher and I did settle it with him the same day. During the time when I had the problem, I had a couple of people lined up for prom dates, not just one person, but two.

KB: [Laughs] And then what happened? They both wanted to go?

RE: Not exactly. I mean that was the idea that we shared at first but one of them found a date and I went with the other.

KB: So it worked. Was that at Newark High School?

RE: Not Newark High School. The high school I went to was Pencader Charter High School.

KB; And is that still there?

RE: It's not there. The charter was revoked in 2013. But going back to my prom day, I did get a suit ahead of time, as well as a flower for my suit and corsage for my date. I gave it to her at her house. We drove on over to Wilmington, at the Doubletree Hotel where the event was held. And when we arrived, there were ballots on a table and we had to fill them out before proceeding into the building. Of course, I voted for myself, and I voted for one of the girls. Later that night when we all gathered around the tables for that big announcement for prom, I was wondering, "I wonder if I made the grade? I wonder if I became king?"

And when I heard Mr. Kess, the host, announce, "Your Prom King is Mr. Reese Eskridge," I was so ecstatic. It was one of the greatest moments of my life. I felt like it was a defining moment when I had gone from the previously-condemned, stigmatized

child who struggled academically to a popular scholar who had his moment in the spotlight. And it was magnificent! [KB: And that was when?] An unforgettable night.

KB: That's pretty cool. And then what did you do after that?

RE: Well after that just came, what everybody else did, graduation, going to college, and I'll get more into detail about that in just a moment.

KB: So, what did you want to be when you grew up?

RE: I had little ambition up until recent years. Originally, my, and my plan in high school was to go into biotechnology but when I got there I found out that the program was gonna shut down at UD before I even had a chance to enroll, so I settled with general biology. During my time I had explored some interests but it wasn't till after I graduated that I discovered what I feel that I'm more made to do, something I'm naturally passionate about, namely the brain sciences, because it's really a young field. It's emerging and I want to be a part of that young movement as it's beginning, because it's a great treat. And, usually when you're talking about leaving a legacy, it's the people who come first, the first generation, that really defines what it means. What it means to work in the field or to make an impact in the field. That doesn't just go for brain sciences, it can go for any field you can think of.

KB: And you're doin' it. Are you gonna get a Master's degree from it or are you still taking...?

RE: I don't know if I'm gonna go to graduate school. I'm the kind of guy who has struggled academically, with the exception of my time at Pencader Charter. Not just grade-wise, but socially and activity-wise I was kind of the shy-guy. I didn't want to get involved in a whole lot. I felt like it wasn't for me. I'm a bit meticulous about getting involved in activities at this point for those reasons, just because of the nature of the activity, the people I meet, and a number of other factors that are a little bit more difficult to explain.

But, the point is, when I, whatever I visit, I have to have some filters. Okay, does it pass through this filter well? Does it pass through this social filter well? Next filter, does it pass through enjoyability? Does it pass through knowledge and wisdom that I can gain from this practical experience? Because I'm taking time out of my busy day and my professional life. I could be doing more on the professional side than the personal side. So I really have to understand, do, do I have a specific set of criteria and does the activity match it up?

KB: Are you still taking those online courses you were talking about?

RE: I'm taking them regularly. I'm involved with at least one course every day. I don't work at it every day, but I'm involved with one every day. Whenever I do work at it, I try to practice my listening skills, because out of the multiple facets of leadership in learning, listening is one of the most important, and that's the one I have the worst time with! Just because of the inherent nature of my Asperger's Syndrome, where I have trouble paying attention to things that are outside of the scope of my interests. But, nevertheless, I always have a deadline, whether it's pre-set or whether I set it myself, and I meet it as

best as I can because I try to uphold the value of integrity, which is important for any leader and any Toastmaster.

KB: And what courses are you taking? What topics are they?

RE: Various topics. Just anything that piques my interest. Mostly it's sciences. I've also looked at the sciences of leadership, the science of everyday thinking, social psychology, and neuroscience topics. How to, like, the science of learning, how to improve your brain, train your brain for better learning and better engagement with others and so forth. It's really mostly about the day-to-day functions and how I relate to them. I also want to demonstrate not only course mastery but subject matter mastery, field mastery. It's part of a grander scheme, I believe, where I can get certificates of achievements as viable and tangible proof of my achievements and knowledge in a subject matter and I can add that to my career portfolio and sell myself when the time comes to do so.

I think, by the way, that's one of the more important things is how you can network, how you sell yourself, what tools do you use, what are, what's most suitable for you. And that comes to the matter of opportunity. Not just at networking events, but afterwards. When I follow up, what exactly is the opportunity that I want? And I think that's becoming increasingly critical for my generation and the generation that will come after mine. Especially when the number of people with disabilities rises and does not constitute a minority anymore.

These soft skills are important, as important as ever, even when the status quo of the educational system can falter, increasingly. And the reason why I take those online courses, for example, is because I want to get those skills without, first off, without paying a huge sum of money to take them. I only have to get one certificate, for example, for about 50 bucks, as opposed to thousands of dollars in college tuition to get undergraduate or graduate credentials, academically speaking.

KB: Do any of them give college credit, or...?

RE: Some of them do offer, I guess you could say, some college credit, but you have to pay hundreds of dollars for that, and sometimes even that's not even affordable, even next to thousands of dollars in tuition. It's a bit of a tricky situation, but the value of learning is the same no matter what and that's really what's most important. The transferable knowledge is the most invaluable type and with this new rules of work, and that's actually a book, by the way that I'm reading, but some of the new rules of work are to really buckle down on the skills that you like and connect them with your deep interests. Understand which industries that you like and what specific function you dream to serve within that industry.

If you can answer professional questions like that, then you have a greater chance of establishing a professional profile and selling it to others convincingly. That is my ultimate goal for my professional life because I'm still early in my career. I'm not giving up the sciences personally, but if I wanted to transfer to any other industry or even any other field, which is a huge transition and it's long-term difficult, I have to make sure I have that skill set. And some good things, good tools, to prove it, the Certificates of Achievement from online courses being an example of that tool.

KB: How do you find these courses?

RE: It's not that complicated, really. I've tried to type in a search when I started as, like, "Online Platforms," and I've found some other platforms like EdX and Coursera and Udemy and LinkedIn Learning. I found LinkedIn Learning, for example, by just looking at the top right part of the screen on the main page, and it says, "LinkedIn Learning." I thought, "Hmm, that looks interesting." So I checked it out and sure enough there was a plethora of courses. There were hundreds of courses that a person could take for free. But it's not entirely free if you enroll because there's a monthly subscription for about \$30. It's worth it though.

For EdX, they offer, and Coursera and Udemy they offer Certificates of Achievement as well. Udemy offers lifetime access to courses, and that's what I like most about that platform. EdX offers really in-depth courses that are basically online equivalents of real college courses. So it's highly structured, highly insightful, and highly useful.

KB: And how did you get involved in Toastmasters?

RE: First off, I can start by saying that I stepped into a Toastmasters Club, more specifically, the Greater Newark Area Club, in October 2015. I did that because of the Toastmasters mission and values. The values are respect, integrity, service, and excellence, or RISE, for short. I actually did a presentation on that but I won't go into detail about that.

The backstory is I first saw Toastmasters International, its web site, in August 2013 and it piqued my interest. I revisited it about a year later, thinking, "Wow! This would be interesting to join." I also saw a clip about the World Championship of Public Speaking, which is the ultimate speaking competition in the world. And I thought, one day I would like to be on that stage and present something very insightful. [KB: And you will.] I just might. That's actually one of my long-term goals is to go to the World Championship stage, maybe in the year 2024 specifically. I could start to enter the International Speech Competition starting next year and build upon my skills, get an understanding of what the nature of competition is like. What makes the International Speech Competition different from the Table Topics Contest, for example?

But why I wanted to join Toastmasters International was just to improve the set of transferable skills that I had so that I could attribute it to my professional life. I know that if I develop my image as a speaker that would help me. And I also had a strong passion in leadership before I even joined. I was part of the UD's national leadership and national honor society, Sigma Alpha Pi, otherwise known as the National Society for Leadership and Success.

I received an invitation to join that in my freshman year of college in February of 2012, a letter for nomination, and all I had to do was accept that and I was in. [KB: Oh, cool.] Pay the dues. So I underwent leadership training for that and I'm going, undergoing leadership training for Toastmasters right now, and that's a reason why I joined is to follow up my experience with the honor society and get that practical experience that I didn't get during my time in the national honor society. It's just literally speaking in front of an audience, no matter how large it is, or how small it is, and just refine, train my brain to deliver messages without notes or anything. Just a simple prompt. I wanted to know all the steps of speech-craft and delivery. And, I knew that that was gonna serve my passion well, whatever it was, whether it means selling myself in less than a minute or delivering

a keynote address that spans an hour or longer. It could range from that to that [gestures left to right].

KB: And you will. So, when you, your major was biology, right? [RE: Yes.] How did you get so interested in biology and how will these things tie together?

RE: Interesting question. I mentioned earlier that my passion in biology was something I discovered in high school, but what I found was biology was not the most specific thing that I liked. I found neuroscience later so I decided to settle with biology because it was in the sciences, it pays well, and the skills I require are transferable to many other fields.

Those were my reasons for majoring in biology. I thought, “I don’t want to be that guy who changes his major.” I have to try to commit to something without spending too much time or too much money in seeking a diversion, a diversion pathway that leads to another accomplishment, like in another major.

KB: And what was your job? I know it’s gone, but what was it?

RE: My job, after I graduated, you mean? [Kim: murmured assent] My job was in Fairville Products, it was a lesser-know company in the Wilmington-Newport area. I got my start there making fuel additives. It was in the chemiclean business and I thought, “If this pays well, that’s good enough for me. And I can work with machines. I can work with hazardous chemicals,” and I did. I have good knowledge of those now and as I speak, I have another job lead. I’m going in for a second interview tomorrow and I think I have a good chance of getting an even better job.

But I think what you’re trying to get at is how do I establish a well-defined professional life, professional goals, professional image? A well-defined career pathway. No matter what, it takes years to develop it, and that goes for anybody. At this stage of my career, which is the earliest stage, I take things as they come along. I try to make the most of opportunities in any way I can so I’ll learn the experience to me, even if I haven’t a job-jump, I can still retain what I got from those experiences. And I know that I’ll find what I’m meant to do with my life eventually. I don’t know if it’ll be up to a decade from now or longer, but I will find it. Life is a big adventure.

KB: So what are your hobbies?

RE: Well, some of my hobbies are taking the online courses. I also have this cool brain training program called Brainfit, I think that’s the name of it, where I can test my various competency skills like focus and social skills and other things, other factors that are a little bit more difficult to name, because I don’t have it right in front of me. But the point is I train my brain a few minutes every day. It contributes to my health and to the strength of my brain so that it can last longer, in a stronger state.

Another one of my hobbies is playing video games in my spare time. I even like the original video games that came out in the late ’90s, too, like some of the peers, some of my peers are who happen to be around my age, like Spyro the Dragon and Crash Bandicoot Warped! [Laughs] I love those games. I play those sometimes. Every once in a while, I go onto my computer and I play a game like SimCity, which were popular in the late ’90s, early 2000s when I was growing up. Those things have stuck with me for the

longest time because I still play them in the present day. It's just great. It's great fun. It gives me balance between personal/professional lives.

I also like to do other events outside of my house such as running events and one example of that is the Insane Inflatable 5K that I went to and that's what really got my interest high in running because you've got a series of obstacle courses and that's combined with standard running paths. They have a pre-designated course and you can have the most fun that anyone can have with an obstacle course while getting a lot of exercise on a 3.1-mile course. Best of all, you can get a finisher's medal each time. When I did my first Insane Inflatable 5K back in last August, I finished with three finisher's medals and I ran 9.3 miles. It's a great way to get fit and have fun at the same time.

KB: Is it in Newark?

RE: It's not in Newark. It was all the way in, like near Atlantic City. It was an hour and half drive but it was so worth it.

KB: And what's the inflatable part?

RE: The inflatable is just like huge inflatable obstacle courses where they have like hilly terrains and holes that you can step through, run through. Balls that go everywhere, gigantic balls. And, like, pillars, inflatable pillars that like hang down or stick up, kind of like stalactites in a cave or stalagmites, only a lot softer and you can crawl through spaces. It's just tons of fun and it gives me a chance to exercise my gross motor skills and my physical strength.

It's all part of not only getting fit but breaking barriers. The, as a person with Asperger's Syndrome, motor delays constitute a barrier and I just wanted that ideal opportunity to get fit, have fun, break that barrier down so I can be set for life and free of that burden of motor delay.

KB: So, the... How does Asperger's hold you back? You always seem like the most confident person I know!

RE: Well, competent/confident. I'm not gonna brag too much but those are traits that I am passionate about and that do define me and my professional life. But if what, you're asking me what holds me back the most, I think it's a matter of confusion. It's not one of the more common characteristics of Asperger's but without a strong support system earlier in life I think that does have a bit of an adverse effect on later life.

KB: Yeah. And which pieces are confusing?

RE: The career path that I'm going down towards, like I don't know exactly what I'm doing. That's why I commit myself to lifelong learning and to use this strategy of transferring skills from one area to another, making the most of opportunities. But, it's hard to get a lot of professional support and build a network when you don't recognize your niche in the professional world, what you're made to do. And that's where I stand right now.

And because sometimes I struggle with engaging with others or I'm afraid to, like, kind of go out of the house and know exactly what I want to talk about, that it could ruin an opportunity that could be ideal for my professional life and ideal for me to move up in

my career, take the next step and ultimately to find a good balance between personal/professional lives and not have so many conflicts about which direction am I going? Whether the conflicts are internal or external.

KB: So, do you think you worry more than other people?

RE: Occasionally, I believe, I do concern myself with maybe some things that I shouldn't. Like, I should be well-established, I should be in this generativity-phase at the age of 24 but it's not gonna happen. Sometimes I have trouble, some trouble, accepting the reality of my situation, namely I have trouble accepting the fact that I'm still developing, learning, growing. I'm not the most talked-about person for that reason. Usually, like dignitaries and other professionals who have a much higher level of expertise in a particular arena than I do are ones that are gonna take a lot of credit, have more opportunities, have more doors open in this corridor called "Professional Life." And I have to be, like, selective in that regard. I have to, like, find the right door to step in towards and I have to have the humility to start, like, back in the first part of the corridor and test each door out and face rejection. In other words, I have to accept that some doors are just locked and I don't have the keys and I can't find the keys to open them.

KB: And neither can I! So, do you think you're treated equally, the same as other people your age?

RE: In some ways I am, but one thing that I've noticed, like, sometimes systems fail and there are stories about, like, how people with Asperger's end up in the criminal justice system, or fail in the educational system. The point there is they don't have accountability for the nature of Asperger's Syndrome. They don't understand it like they should. I am part of an under-represented population and if anything was to happen then my difficulties would be overlooked and that would not be good. That would create a whole host of other challenges down the road and immediately on the spot as well, depending on the case. So really, as a self-advocate, I can tell you that you have to provide yourself with your own voice, because nobody else will. That lack of representation really kills and, and that is how the system's faltering.

Unless you have good representatives who have maybe years of experience in the respective contexts, then there's little chance that there's going to be a great understanding, good sensitivity that Aspies idealize in others and in themselves. They're living in a world that's not exactly made for them and I know how that feels. A world that constantly rejects you or misunderstands you or treats you so harshly that it's unbearable. So, one person's definition of "harshness" is not the same as a person with Asperger's, most likely.

KB: So what do you think are the, the characteristics of Asperger's?

RE: Some of the fundamental characteristics? I believe that the big things that account for the majority of the struggles are, like, lack of sociality, lack of social life and learning how to read social cues, and that leads to, you know, some flaws in parenting styles, like parents don't always understand what the kid's going through. They can't express themselves enough to convey a lot of knowledge about emotional experiences, so the socio-emotional part of it is really all-important. And, mentors are definitely necessary, whether... And the mentor can be anybody, a parent, a friend, a caregiver, even someone



who's younger than you. Can you...you can take, like, anyone from whom you can take valuable lessons and go through valuable experiences with is a mentor.

KB: So what are the characteristics of Asperger's?

RE: Characteristics? [KB: How would you recognize somebody else with Asperger's?] Well some of the outward signs that are most visible, I believe, are limited eye contact, fidgeting, rocking back and forth, even I'm doing that right now, and some people may not even realize it. Even I'm not always consciously aware of it, but it happens. So, some odd physical movements, maybe some odd speech, one-sidedness in conversation. Not a whole lot of self-talk, like more like prompted speech. Bigger emotional reactions. The worst case in that aspect is meltdowns. Like huge, exaggerated emotional experiences, although it's more dramatic than exaggerated, because you just can't help it sometimes.

KB: And what, what would trigger it?

RE: There are any number of triggers. It depends on the severity of sensitivity in the brain and throughout the body as well as sensitivity in emotion, as well. So there's the sensory factor and the emotion factor that together create sometimes overwhelming experiences and that's what triggers meltdowns. It's just too much to process. It's a matter of processing that information, and if there's an overabundance of information that's coming in from all areas and, and it's not stopping, then before you know it you're on the ground, panicking, fighting for your life.

KB: And do you grow out of it as you, as you've gotten older?

RE: That's sometimes a misconception. The truth is some people really learn to overcome sensory and emotional difficulties by any number of ways, whether it's building emotional intelligence, by reading something and by practicing, or just having a solid support system even without practice. Whatever the scenario, I think it's important that you know yourself best and you take advantage of what you can control and accept some of the things that you cannot control.

KB; And get out of it?

RE: It's best to get out of an overwhelming environment until you become calm. Sometimes all it takes is to know what to expect, what, to know what kind of input you're going to receive from the environment, from people, from anything your brain can respond to, because the Asperger's brain is almost always more receptive than neuro-typical brain.

KB: What else do you want to say about it? About the condition?

RE: Hmm. I guess one thing I could say is explicit instruction really helps. This is especially important for the educational context. It's not a good idea to just assume that someone is taking in the implicit social cues that people take for granted, for example. Or, some other cues for learning. Aspies don't think in an abstract way. They have to look at concrete details and analyze those, so really, if you want to serve someone with Asperger's Syndrome, you have to work with that processing system somehow, and there are any number of ways. You can get creative with lessons and how you present them so that it will suit that system well.

KB: So what would work best, if you were a teacher of kids with Asperger's?

RE: That's kind of a broad question because each child is different. [KB: What would work best for you?] But the, the general approach, I think, would just be to tap into that system. Make sure that you can have various media available, because Aspies can learn fast through video modeling or through reading or through expression, self-expression like writing or through music or something like that. So whatever's most memorable is something that you have to go with if you're a teacher. So you really have to learn to get creative with the curriculum, to make sure that the Aspies can encode all of that information and process it enough so that they can work with it independently, ultimately. Because that's always the ultimate goal of any educator and any student is to have that set of independence and applicability to realize circumstances.

KB: Do you know about Montessori? Do you think that would be good? [RE: Montessori?] Yeah, sort of "learn by doing."

RE: That's really the key I think. And that could be a key part of educational reform efforts. I don't know if it already is. I'm guessing it is, but it's not commonplace enough to be applicable to all schools. Schools, some school somewhere is always going to struggle with understanding neurologically-different students. And I think the Montessori experience is the single best approach for any student. All the matter is, how exactly do you work out that experience?

So you've got the three different learning types of styles as well. The Aspies are predominantly visual learners. We think in pictures. We can immediately recognize a picture faster than we can recognize text on a paper, for example. And the other types of learning, I know the second type is kinesthetic learning, learning by touch. Some Aspies like that, too, because of the sensory experience that is associated with it. And there's also the auditory, learn by hearing. But if you take all three of those learning styles together you get an ideal Montessori experience, all the matter is emphasizing, okay, which one does this particular individual learn best? Does he learn best through verbal instruction? Assuming that listening and paying attention is playing its role very well. Or is getting that initial attention better when you present slides or a video of some kind? When you watch a documentary as opposed to listen to a teacher speak in a classroom.

You can take in the same information using any different number of ways. But really, you have to understand the whole big picture of learning to understand, okay, this is the detail that works and along with that comes the learning objectives and then you have to just delve into the experience.

KB: So, if you could have a magic wand and change public education for Asperger's, what would you, how would you, how would you structure a program? I know you pretty much said it, but expand!

RE: For an Asperger's program, first off, if I'm a teacher walking into a classroom, I want to make sure that I understand Asperger's itself, as much as possible, before I try to attribute it to the teaching context. But it's not enough to just be a teacher. A teacher has to play many roles to serve these kids well. The teacher also has to be a leader, an advocate in IEP meetings, for example. You have to be, like, a caregiver, really, and just be there when meltdowns occur, when behavioral challenges play their roles. You have to

stay on top of everything. That is the bottom line, is to stay on top of the whole experience.

KB: What's the best thing to do with a kid with a meltdown?

RE: The best to do with a kid with a meltdown is first off determine what triggered the meltdown. If you can immediately trigger it, then you know what to correct, but if it's not obvious then try to take the child to a quiet zone, just stop the activity. Take him to whole different room which does not have like bright lights or loud sounds or, or like rough areas, where it could even be like a sensory-experience area with some equipment. If you know that the Aspie is familiar with a particular object, you can bring that to him or her in attempts to calm him or her down.

And I think when the meltdown ends, one of the signs is a better chance of eye contact as well as controlled breathing and just better focus, I guess. It's, it's not too hard to determine when a meltdown starts and stops. All the matter is, do you make it better or worse? That's really where the concern lies in that regard.

KB: Is it better to touch the kid or not?

RE: Hmm, it depends on the kid, I think. But sometimes you have to, even when the kid is hypersensitive, sometimes you have to grab them by the arms or even lay them down on the floor and squeeze by sitting on the kid and getting his or her arms or legs and keeping them still and pressurized, because that serves as a calming mechanism for any kind of meltdown you can think of, no matter what the trigger is.

KB: And how long do they usually last?

RE: Hmm. The lengths can vary depending on the stimulus and the input. Some meltdowns can last for maybe, like, less than a minute. Others can go on for an hour or longer. It's unpleasant either way. It's just an intense emotional experience where you just can't help but have an emotional breakdown on the spot. And that the...you sometimes have to wait it out and let the information flow through the brain. Go from one part out to the other. Eventually it will come to an end and... You could even try something like give a child a certain prompt and if his working memory is working well, then you can take in a new piece of information or recite an old piece. That's how you know that you've got focus back and you can bring the Aspie back into the classroom or wherever he's going and resume the experience that you were doing prior to the meltdown.

KB: So, I think, I think we need to get your voice out there. Now do you feel like your voice is being heard through the work that you've been doing?

RE: My...I lend my voice for Asperger's Syndrome on behalf of that cause primarily through aspergers101.com where I write articles and do Podcasts and I'm later going to expand my scope. I've got a small circle with Reddit Podcasting, but I'm going to go to a larger circle where I can engage with other stakeholders and there are all kinds... I don't have time to explain it here, but I think if I learn to set up and take initiatives in my local community, that would be a good start. I could also help communities beyond my local community and start there as well. There (are) any number of approaches I could take.

So that's how I leave my legacy as an Aspie in order to serve the Asperger's community well. I best express myself through my writing.

KB: I think through your speaking. Do you, are you able to talk about this stuff through Toastmasters at all?

RE: Actually my very first speech, which was the icebreaker speech from the *Competent Communicator* manual that they provide, I talked about myself, because that was the objective and I spoke about how Asperger's affected my life and all the hardships I faced and how it led me to that point.

KB: Next. So, if you could rewrite your own history, what would you have done different, or what should have been done differently?

RE: Earlier in my life I wish I'd never had Asperger's, but as culture changes and as society changes, everybody learns to better appreciate your own diversity for what it is, because as Temple Grandin said, the world needs all kinds of minds. And it does, because the more types of minds you have in the world, the more common they become and the more common it is, the less of a minority group it is, and the bigger the majority, the bigger society must accommodate those people, rather than the other way around, rather than try to blend into the current nature of society and work with that.

And, in terms of rewriting my history, I would say one thing. I would say that I never moved, wish I'd moved to Lyndeborough. If I stayed in Nashua I would have had a much better support system, a better climate where I could thrive rather than be stuck in survival mode the whole time.

KB: Do you think you'll ever move back there as a grown-up?

RE: I don't know if I will. I, I, I don't know if I would because Nashua has changed a lot and not necessarily for the better since I used to live there back in the late '90s. It's just not the same feel, and most of the people I knew are gonna move on with their lives, maybe go elsewhere, so there's no point unless I find something that could really make a difference in my professional life.

KB: So, if you could tell people one thing about yourself and your experiences, what, what would you tell them? What do you want history to remember about you?

RE: I think the one thing that I would want history to remember most about me is the odds against me do not define me. I have a philosophy that allows me to break through barriers and that philosophy is determinism. Everything happens for a reason and I take everything in by choice and make the most of it. No matter what people or society does to me, I am always confident that I will leave some kind of legacy behind in my wake.

But as long as I am free, I am free to lend my voice. I am free to do what I want with my life, make my own decisions, carry out my life the way I want to. That I can be a jack-of-all-trades if I want to. Again, contrary to this popular stereotype that Aspies have restricted interests, I feel like that's what I'm doing right now by doing Toastmasters and by finishing college and by going to places in my professional life, such as the Art of Persuasion, for example, where I really have to sell myself despite any difficulties I have and show people what I can truly do.

KB: So tell me about the ADA. How has that impacted your life, 'cause you were born around the time it was invented, right?

RE: A few years after it was passed. I was born in 1993 and it was passed in 1990. I think the closest thing I have for that, even though it's not directly impacted my life, I think it has directly impacted society in a way that promotes acceptance and inclusion and other principles that me and countless other people with disabilities have, have faith in.

I think the ADA helps, is some... is like a trendsetting act that is, has become popularized enough so that society can learn to appreciate it and use it effectively, even though there are challenges. It also serves as a point of reference for both people with disabilities and without disabilities to use and say, "Oh, yeah. This is the reality. It's like I never thought of it this way." So it provides that key insight that allows society to progress forward step by step, year by year to refine systems on behalf of people with disabilities and as someone with a disability, I like to have as many definitions of security in my life as possible while leaving room for adventure and challenge.

One definition of security is job security, employment. Does company culture generally have a sense of how to serve people with disabilities very well, even when they are hidden and subtle and complicated? I think the ADA is playing a pivotal role in changing culture so that workforce has more knowledge, independence, discipline, and satisfaction for people with disabilities or "KIDS" for short.

KB: Or "KIDS." [Laughs]

RE: KIDS: Knowledge, Independence, Discipline, and Satisfaction. [KB: Did you make that up?] I made that up myself, and guess what? It can apply to anything. It doesn't just, the KIDS doesn't just apply to "kids," it can apply to adult life, too. It can apply to professional life, any context you can think of, because whenever you try to get someone to do something you're giving them knowledge. And ideally you want to give them full knowledge.

With knowledge comes the ability to carry it out yourself, to apply it to whatever is necessary in your life or whatever you want to be in your life, even if it's not necessary. So, get the knowledge. Do it yourself.

Next comes "Discipline." So, even though you have the knowledge, and you can use it, you're independently, that's not to say that you have boundaries. So you have to establish certain parameters for how you use that knowledge so that you can use it ethically, professionally, productively. And no matter what the purpose is, in the case of people with disabilities I would say that you have to use knowledge and be able to use it yourself for the purpose of serving them directly while not ignoring key details. You cannot overlook anything and you can't be careless about it, when, if, in the event you overlook something. So even, whether you overlook it intentionally or not, you really have to understand the necessary parameters, like, okay, this kind of vocabulary is not good. Or this kind of culture deserves refinement so that people with disabilities feel more comfortable, they feel like they a sense of security, justice, peace, freedom, and anything else that a person would want for life.

And that is "Satisfaction," those things: freedom, justice, and discipline, and many others. Really, when you combine knowledge, discipline, and independence, you get a personal

sense of freedom that is the best definition of “satisfaction.” It’s not characterized by hedonistic pleasures such as those that come with addiction, for example. That’s not the same as having your life together and serving best interest for both yourself and for others.

So, at the personal, interpersonal, and impersonal levels, Knowledge, Independence, Discipline, and Satisfaction is key, I believe. Key to the best quality lifestyle you can have, however you define it.

KB: So, so. Talk about something you said before: the world is one vast solar system and worlds that often unite insights into harm. [RE: Hmm.] You said that!

RE: That’s my saying, yeah. I think when I said that what I meant was: each world is unique. Some worlds are quite unpleasant, like the giant gas planets are unpleasant. The earth is a place where life can thrive. Any planet that’s close to the sun is just hot. But all the planets are in harmony and the solar system would not be the same if it wasn’t for all of those planets orbiting in harmony.

And the fact that each planet is unique presents some unique insights into the solar system. It’s made astronomers curious for countless generations, for dozens of generations, or even more. As early as Greece, astronomy was a huge deal. It’s one of the oldest scientific disciplines in the world. So when you’re talking about studying the planets, you, you want to have that variety so that you have a beautiful picture with a lot of diversity and complexity that will keep your interest at an all-time high. And that presents learning challenges that deserve to be overcome and, [KB: So it makes the...] and it just doesn’t stop. That’s where the joy lies.

The joy lies in exploration and the same goes for people with disabilities. You want to keep exploring these different worlds so that you un..., you can appreciate the real, not just the expanse of the solar system and what comprises it, but really that these worlds are not entirely different from your own world. Like, the earth can be significantly different from Saturn, for example, but they have some of the same features, like weather patterns and lightning and wind and all of the essential ingredients for life and for sustenance and for magnificence.

KB: So it’s a good analogy for people in the world.

RE: Absolutely. We all have our own world and when we take the time to learn more about each other, you’ll learn more about your own world as well, not just theirs.