

**"Life with Asperger's: One Man Tells His Story" by Scott Robertson**

**Category : Neurodiversity**

**Published by Scott Robertson [admin] on 2007/3/2**

"Life with Asperger's: One Man Tells His Story"

Published in The Bergen Record newspaper.

September 29, 2006

My name is Scott Michael Robertson. I'm a 26-year-old third-year Ph.D. student studying information sciences and technology at Penn State University.

I'm different from my friends and peers in graduate school in that I have Asperger's syndrome, a disorder on the autism spectrum. I self-diagnosed with AS in 1999. Six years later, a doctor confirmed my diagnosis.

The youngest of three children, I grew up in the Pines Lake community of Wayne. It was apparent to my parents from the beginning that I was very different from my two siblings. I was extremely shy in most social situations and often didn't look people in the eyes when I spoke.  
autism

Many of my senses were acutely heightened. I reacted defensively when people tried to touch or hug me. I could detect many smells and hear many sounds from far away. When I was 6, even a simple visit to the grocery store overwhelmed my senses. The vibrant colors, reverberating voices of shoppers and intense smells of thousands of diverse foods were too much for my young brain to process and filter.

I learned to sit up, crawl, walk and ride a bike very late. I feared swimming in the ocean during family trips to the New Jersey Shore because of the powerful and loud crashing waves.

As I grew older, my communication and social oddities became readily apparent. I had trouble comprehending facial expressions and body language. While I did have a few friends in elementary school, interacting with my peers and establishing friendships in junior high and high school was extremely challenging. Children bullied and teased me incessantly for many years. They called me names, threatened me, ignored me and rejected any efforts I made to join group conversations.

I felt as if I were an alien on a planet that was not my own. I often became very sad and depressed, although I continued tenaciously to produce my best academic efforts in school and brought home mostly A's (and some B's).

More than anything, I longed to know why I was so very different from others and why I couldn't act like they did no matter how hard I tried.

Serendipitously, I found the answer I was seeking in the fall of 1999, during my freshman year at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Halfway through the term, we read a book about autism called "Mindblindness." The book proposed that people with autism have a deficit in "theory of mind" skills

that inhibits their ability to understand the beliefs and ideas of others and themselves. This accounts for the social and communication differences seen in autism.

I was assigned to write a paper on autism and theory of mind for the class. Being the good student that I am, I went online to learn more. My eyes soon went wild in amazement. I realized quickly that my experiences, background and developmental history fit the description of Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism, to a T.

I had finally found why I was so different: I was a person with autism.

Knowing the reason behind my differences helped me to teach myself how to adapt and fit in better with the world around me. Through practice and hard work, I learned how to read and use facial expressions better and how to interact in different social settings.

I developed strategies for handling sensory overload. I joined the student newspaper in undergrad and gained practice in understanding other points of view through interviewing hundreds of people for stories during my three years as an editor and reporter.

I also succeeded in forming close-knit friendships with my comrades on the newspaper. Since then, I have been very fortunate to meet many other wonderful people in graduate school at Carnegie Mellon University and then at Penn State University, as well as online.

My friends have helped me through the good times and the bad times and have taught me many valuable lessons about life. They have been great people, with whom I now share my time, thoughts and feelings. In turn, I have also felt strongly energized at helping them out when they sought a shoulder to cry on or an ear to listen.

Socially, I've become more comfortable in recent years chatting with friends and peers at parties and bars and participating in trips to fairs, amusement parks and the movies.

Having had few friendships as a youngster, I cherish what I have today.

During my junior year of undergraduate studies, I made a promise to myself that I would repay all of the support I had received over the years by paying it forward.

I committed myself to pursuing research that could help others with disabilities. My Ph.D. thesis will likely explore how to design technologies (like personal digital assistants) for teens and adults with autism. I'm also involved in two recently launched autism initiatives: Spectrum University ([spectrumuniversity.com](http://spectrumuniversity.com)), a Web site about autism and college, and the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network ([autisticselfadvocacy.com](http://autisticselfadvocacy.com).)

I began sharing my own experiences to help others learn from what I have lived. On August 4, my birthday, I gave the keynote speech at the 2006 National Autism Conference. My heart was pounding as endless worries flooded my nervous mind. I looked out from a podium across a sea of more than 900 people and spoke about the challenges and aspirations of being an adult with autism.

If I could impart just one lesson from my life for you as a reader, it would be that many accomplishments can be achieved and many barriers and obstacles can be overcome if you work hard and remain optimistic and focused on the goal ahead rather than the past behind.