



We're Not Broken

An Interview With Bestselling Autism Author

ERIC GARCIA

Contributed by Ron Sandison, an autistic author

When I was diagnosed with autism in 1982, only one in every 10,000 children in the United States had an autism diagnosis. As a teenager, I felt different, much like an endangered species. I was often excluded from social activities due to my outbursts and meltdowns. The neurodiversity movement has transformed people's perspective of autism from a medical condition that needs to be cured to a unique way of processing information. As an adult I celebrate my neurodiversity and the gifts autism has given me such as the ability to memorize 15,000 Scriptures and thousands of humorous stories. I was excited to interview Eric Garcia, author of *We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation*. This is the book, I would've loved for my former classmates who bullied me to read to understand my autistic quirks and sensory issues.

1. In writing your book *We're Not Broken* how did you meet people to interview? Share some stories of connections and friends you made while writing your book.

A lot of it came through Twitter. Oftentimes, I made the clarion call using the Twitter hashtag #ActuallyAutistic. After I interviewed them, I hopefully built enough trust that they would refer me to other people. That's how I met Chris Williams and his family, as well as John Marble, Hari Srinivasan and Jessica Benham, none of whom I'd met in person before.

2. What did you enjoy most about writing your book and what did you learn about yourself?

I've said it before but writing a book was both the best and worst decision I've ever made. It was an incredibly rewarding experience because I got to meet and interview so many lovely people. I think it also showed me that many things I questioned about myself or others saw as weird are actually quite common among autistic people, whether it was stimming or social anxiety.

Yet it was incredibly challenging to write a book while holding a full-time job. Any time I wasn't working, I was writing this book, and any time I didn't write, I spent fretting about writing. It completely took over my life and

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was part of the reason why I had to leave my job at The Washington Post, even though that was my dream job. Writing a book is also incredibly taxing because there isn't as rigorous a fact-checking process as there are with newspapers. So if you screw up, it's totally on you and there will be nobody to catch you when you fall.

3. What skills did you develop as an intern for the White House and how did they help you in your career as a journalist?

Sorry to say, I didn't learn anything particularly sexy. I mostly learned about how to make the most of my daily schedule. Interns have to abide by strict hours so you need to make every minute of the day count. I interned in the mail room, so I had to learn a lot about keeping things organized. I think I continue that mind-set as a journalist, even if as a whole, I am generally a messy person. I think more than how it helped me to be a journalist, it confirmed to me that I should be a journalist. Interning at the White House was an honor of a lifetime, but I also walked away incredibly disillusioned with Barack Obama and the Democratic Party, even if I still admire and respect Michelle Obama. I found myself constantly having to square the Obama who ran for president and Obama's policies in office. So it taught me that I cared more about holding politicians accountable. So that's what led to journalism.

4. How did you become a self-advocate?

I'm not an advocate and I kind of take umbrage when people paint me as one. I consider myself to be a journalist who covers autism. I think anytime someone from a marginalized community winds up writing about that very community, they are immediately pegged as an advocate or an activist. Rather, I think as an autistic person, I have a certain sense about how to cover this community as an autistic person myself. I can offer a different type of news judgment and framing of narratives about autism.

5. How can society empower people with autism to live fulling lives?

Start from the assumption that autistic people are human beings who are fine as is. When people hear me say this, they think I am oblivious to the challenges autistic people face, which is not the case. I do see autism as a disability and it creates certain impairments. But we should provide all the services possible to manage those impairments while at the same time, assuming that autistic people themselves are not failed versions of normal. If you start at that assumption, it changes how you determine what autistic people need.

6. What are three common myths society has about autism and how can we change them?

Polling-wise, plenty of people still believe that autism is caused by vaccines, which is patently untrue. But that sowed the seeds for the current vaccine panic around COVID shots. The other ones are that autistic people aren't empathetic (we are, even if we don't initially understand how someone is feeling at the moment), and that it mostly affects white, upper-class male children. These can mostly be fixed by re-examining the diagnostic criteria to fix the inherent biases and chucking ideas like the Extreme Male Brain theory.

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7. I like your concept of the term ‘higher support needs’ rather than labeling autistic people as higher or lower functioning on the spectrum. What benefits can inclusion language provide for individuals with disabilities and autism?

Ultimately, I prefer these terms because they are more descriptive and actually embody what autistic people need rather than how neurotypicals perceive them. Functioning labels are based on how others see autistic people.

8. What are some areas people with autism still struggle due to a lack of inclusion? How can society become more inclusive in those areas?

I mean, where **don't** they struggle because of a lack of inclusion? It seems that most autistic people who succeed do so despite the barriers in place, rather than opportunities that should be universally available. Society starts at the baseline assumption that most autistic people can't accomplish much, so we set expectations below sea level. The remedies are to consult autistic people to see how they could be included and then also presuming competence, then working from there.

9. How did a community college prepare you for attending a university?

I was wholly incapable of managing my own schedule and I don't think I could have passed some of my general education classes while trying to navigate living on my own. It gave me almost training wheels for how to learn how to be accountable to myself and ensure I could succeed at a college level. I've also said that community colleges have just as good or even better accommodations than some universities do because they serve fewer people and don't carry as many ableist ideas of who can be a college student that universities do.

10. What were some accommodations you received in college and how can students ask for accommodations?

Chaffey College mostly allowed me to take math exams in an isolated space and have additional time, which saved me because I was and am horrible at math (which contradicts the stereotype). At the University of North Carolina, I mostly relied on my guidance counselor to help me map out my week. I honestly can't give any real recommendations for how to ask for accommodations. Disclosing can lead to getting the services that students need just as much as it can subject them to ableist attitudes from professors. Also, I think the big problem is that the system as it exists puts the onus on students rather than requiring colleges and universities to be accessible. Asking for accommodations will be easier once universities are made with disabled and autistic people in mind.

11. What advice would you give to individuals with autism struggling with employment?

I don't really think I can offer any productive advice because doing so would imply that they need to do something different to find employment. The way employment for autistic people is set up makes them simultaneously responsible for finding their "special interest" that makes them hireable while at the same time, asks them to not be "too autistic." Similarly, autistic people are constantly unsure of whether they should disclose and often risk their employment if they do. The bigger question is what can employers do to ensure that their places of employment are more accepting of autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people.

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12. How can companies become more autistic-friendly in the workplace?

There's a big push to hire autistic people and do these "autism at work programs." I don't necessarily begrudge them or think people are bad for starting them. But I do think many employers design these programs before making their workplaces accessible and autism-friendly and I think oftentimes, they don't consult their autistic employees. And for employers who say they don't have any autistic employees, I guarantee that you do. Autistic people work in every sector of the economy and in every type of position you can imagine. The most important thing is to make an environment where autistic people can be comfortable disclosing their neurotype (if they want to disclose it) and to give their input on how to improve the company.

13. How can shared living help people who have difficulty with executive functions to gain more independence?

I don't use it but from when I profiled Julia Bascom and Colton Callahan, I think I learned how it can help autistic people live independently, have their own lives separate from congregate care settings or with their family and still have their needs met. A lot of times, I think people assume that independent living means not requiring any types of services whatsoever, but that's a really flat description. I think shared living allows autistic people to have the services they need while not being tethered to onerous requirements or infantilizing expectations and at the same time, it allows them to make their own decisions.

14. What were some challenges you experienced as you transition into adulthood and how did you adapt?

I think the biggest challenge was that people didn't see me as autistic, or if they did, they saw me as "high-functioning" and therefore, not needing any types of services or accommodations. I had these same ideas about myself; once I entered university or I got a job, I thought "I don't need services because I 'overcame' being autistic." But that is just malarkey, to borrow from President Joe Biden. So once I entered the working world, I didn't want to disclose I was autistic, lest I had my colleagues or classmates think less of me. This cycle repeated itself at Chaffey, UNC and my first job. It was only once I became more honest with myself about being autistic that I got more in control of my career, and it wasn't just because I had more confidence. I grew because of my empathetic professors and employers.

15. Share a humorous story from your life.

Probably the funniest story was when I was a White House intern, I was terrified of meeting Michelle Obama and embarrassing myself in front of her. I was 20 years old and living on my own for the first time. But at a going-away party for one of her staffers, she showed up and I did my best to avoid her. Then, I turn around while I am serving coffee and cookies to people (as interns do), and then she is talking with some of my fellow interns. She asked what I did and I said "correspondence, Ma'am (which was a glorified term for the mailroom)." Then I noticed she had a nice pearl necklace on so I complimented her, and she said "thank you." And I nearly passed out. I just went about on my way to make sure I didn't blow it or say anything to make her think less of me.

16. What are some cool plans for 2022?

Honestly, just hoping to stay alive and see my family once enough people get vaccinated to not worry about the pandemic. Also, I will be plenty busy with my day job at The Independent, with the midterm elections.



What is Neurodiversity?: AAoM's Upbound Candidates' Views and Thoughts

Steven Marion

Neurodiversity to me means the differences in our minds - how we process the world, think and solve problems - and a paradigm that views these the same as other differences. The traditional view divides our minds into "normal" or "disabled," treating most variations as hindrances. In reality, some are hindrances, but others are strengths, and most are neither or both. A tall person will be better at basketball than gymnastics; a short person the opposite; a person without legs cannot compete traditionally with either. But a person with a sixth finger is only constrained by the closed-mindedness of others.

Mark Fortin: Autism: A Shield and Barrier

Autism for me is not the presence of something, but rather something missing - a kind of social blindness. In groups of more than three people a conversation can get away from me like a slippery fish - it seems to be able to wiggle out of my grasp until it's gone and I can't see where it is anymore or even comprehend it. When you're unable to see certain things, having guidance is incredibly important.

Growing up, my parents largely acted as a shield for me; to an extent, though, it also acted as a barrier - making it difficult to bond with my peers. In college, this became much more of a problem. As an engineering student, engineering teams are incredibly important - looking back, I feel that I squandered opportunities with other students in favor of more solitary research with professors.

Mason Turner

Neurodiversity can be seen as a blessing and a curse. With a mild case of Asperger's, For my entire life, I have had difficulty picking up social cues. To compensate, I go out of my way to not offend anyone. However my Asperger's has also given me an ability to focus intensely and learn incredibly quickly. I may sometimes be unintentionally awkward, but I would not change my Asperger's even if I could. At this point in my life, I enjoy being different.



Charlie Gorman

Henry Cavendish led a painful existence. Painfully shy, inside his manor he rarely saw guests, communicating to his servants with placed notes. Painfully curious, his inquiries of amperage (counting the number of convulsions after pricking his thumbs with electrodes) was allegedly how he assigned statistical measure to electrical current. Painfully alone, the few adult associations he had mediated his desire to cache himself from the world. Henry kept meticulous notes, rarely publishing his findings and frequent skirmishes about who had the right to discovery would erupt. In remembering Cavendish, we confront the question: how many more quiet, ensconced lives of achievement have been forgotten?

Justin Pierce: What Neurodiversity Means to Me

Neurodiversity to me, means finding a place of acceptance amongst friends, colleagues, mentors, and even family. Knowing for every mundane task I might find difficult, there are many difficult professional problems I can solve with great ease just by thinking differently and using what software tools I have available. Asking for help or guidance is no longer seen as a sign of weakness but of great communication when a task may not have been thoroughly explained. Every workday ends with a feeling of accomplishment, that I am still an asset, and no longer a broken marionette worthy only of pity.

Iain Smith: What does neurodiversity mean to me?

I'm autistic and neurodiverse. Just because I have a disability doesn't mean I'm going to allow that to stop me from getting to where I want to in life. Having a disability can be challenging at times compared to people without disabilities. I was diagnosed with autism at a very young age. My parents didn't know if I would speak. Being 22 years old with autism I've broken through a lot of barriers along the way. Being neurodiverse is more of a gift than a disability and makes me more motivated to achieve what I want to do in life.

Justina Bradley

"Neurodiversity" means to me that we all have different likes and dislikes. In my opinion, it's okay to be yourself, as long as you don't go and try to force somebody else to be a carbon copy of you. That's just what I see as "selfishness."



Upcoming Community Events



Date	Event
March 18	Navigating Autism Today Conference
March 18	Sibshops
March 19	Father's Autism Support Group
April 4	Autism 101 Lunch & Learn
April 9	Father's Autism Support Group
April 13	Watch Me Grow
April 15	SibShops
May 2	21st Annual START Conference
May 2	Watch Me Grow 2.0
May 19	Independent Living Training



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