

Hello Senator Wieland and members of the committee:

My name is Darrin Albert. I am an adult with Asperger's Syndrome. I currently work as a job coach and peer support coordinator for individuals with disabilities. I have had the diagnosis for over 5 years. I have learned to accept Asperger's Syndrome as part of my self-concept. It helps explain many of the difficulties I have with work, school, and relationships.

People have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is common knowledge. However, for many, it is a general mantra that sounds good on paper, if not a bit poetic when shouted from the rooftops or from the balconies of ivory towers. Down in the trenches, however, these abstract concepts take on more specific forms. They translate into decent housing, happy relationships, rewarding careers, education, and affordable health care.

Like the concepts of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, equality under the Americans with Disabilities Act is also vague when it is discussed as a macro-level generality. In the trenches it is different. Why are over 80% of people with Asperger's Syndrome unemployed despite many being skilled and/or educated? Why does the ADA have to feel like a gamble as we weight the pros and cons of disclosing our diagnosis during a job interview? Full disclosure of any disability during and after an interview should be standard operating procedure of the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, many people (myself included) often find it uncomfortable to disclose our diagnosis for fear of being misunderstood. There is also the potential of overt or covert discrimination.

So far I have discussed the ivory towers and the trenches. But what about me? Personally, I had and continue to have a very difficult time living with Asperger's Syndrome. One example is my getting expelled from grad school about 5 years ago for no other reason than having a 4.0 GPA and being weird. Although I did eventually obtain my degree in a different department after a lengthy appeal process with the help of ND Protection and Advocacy, the time and stress involved were excessive and continue to impact me today.

People with Asperger's Syndrome are often eccentric and think outside the box. While it is recognized that discrimination based on skin color or gender is not right, it is still considered okay to shun people who are different or who don't fit in. Personality is a fixed human trait much like eye color, skin color, or gender. In fact, personality constitutes the essence of who we are as people and makes us each unique, equal, and special.

Teasing and bullying are no more okay when you are an adult than when you are a child. This needs to be understood from the ivory tower, practiced in the trenches, and the leftover pain dealt with by the individual.

There are no bad people, only bad situations. And while this stance reduces the pointing of fingers and the passing of bucks, it does precious little to deal with the etiology of bad situations. One bad situation is how you need experience to get a job and you need a job to get experience. Situations like this can prevent people from finding work or housing. People who lack social skills, such as those with Asperger's Syndrome, can find it even more difficult to drive a wedge into such vicious cycles as they may lack the social ability to charm an employer or landlord during a simple interview. Psychological constructs, like Asperger's Syndrome, are not as salient or visible as disabilities of a physical nature. But this does not make them any less real. What is outta sight is not necessarily out of mind.

Terms like "weirdo" and "creep" are far too common in society today. Sadly, these terms all too often fall on people with Asperger's Syndrome who lack typical social decorum. Eccentric people have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Thanks for your time,

Darrin