

Chairman Wieland and members of the committee

Hi, my name is Isaac Gregoire, and I have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. As many of you already know, Asperger's Syndrome is a disability that affects one's way of thinking in many, unique ways and that every person who has Asperger's faces many different challenges.

I'd like to share my own personal experiences.

To begin with, I was born into a family consisting of my mother, step-father, three half-sisters, and two step-brothers. One of my strengths is being able to remember almost every memory from the beginning of Kindergarten. However, this characteristic can also be a shortcoming, as it doesn't matter whether the experience is positive or negative. I remember my life being very difficult.

At home, my step-father, who was an alcoholic, was very violent. Words that describe him include: selfish, arrogant, deceiving, and unloving - he DID NOT deserve the title of being a father. Looking back, I can see that the way my step-father treated me increased my depression and anxiety.

To make problems worse, when it came to going to school, there was no relief. I was harassed, made fun of, pushed around (even assaulted three times), up until high school. Between Kindergarten and High School, life did not seem very worthwhile to me. I developed serious depression, where I would inflict physical pain against myself, but NEVER someone else.

Relating back to my depression, I was in a rehabilitation hospital quite a few times due to suicidal thoughts and attempts. Because home was not seen as a safe residence, at age eight, my grandparents offered to take me into their family, to help me get the help and support I needed. Although their home provided me with safety and consistency, I still continued to struggle in school, both with schoolwork and socialization with peers. A variety of labels were placed on me and led to many different medications being prescribed, none of which have helped.

When I was 15, I was placed in residential treatment at the Dakota Boys' and Girls' Ranch in Fargo after outpatient counseling had failed. At the ranch, I was subjected to a battery of tests that resulted in more medication and more diagnoses, both of which failed miserably in improving my situation, behavior, and outlook.

What has helped me was the diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. This diagnosis has led to a dramatic change in me being more comfortable with myself, and my family being more aware of my disability. Because of this change, I was able to receive the appropriate help I needed with difficulties at home and at school. I received therapy, guidance from my family, and have had better and targeted help during school through a tailored IEP that addressed specific challenges while allowing for flexibility when new challenges surfaced.

If I had been diagnosed with Asperger's at an earlier age, I would have not only had the help in school that I needed (such as help with academics and homework), but I would have also benefited from a better self-esteem because I would have known that I have a VALID disability. Before I was diagnosed, I thought that the way I was, was different. Now I know that the way I feel and behave is normal for a person with Asperger's.

In daily life, I try to keep the following in mind:

Things I excel in are: shopping, specifically for groceries and other necessities; being a great visual learner; and excelling as an artist as well as other hands-on activities. I currently reside in and maintain my own apartment, and am a licensed driver. When I am employed, I am punctual and able to get up on my own and fulfill assigned duties.

Things I struggle with are: verbal communication such as conversation; applying for college - applications and financial aid; assertiveness in efforts to gain employment; and money management.

All in all, I see that I do not have a disability but merely an obstacle in life that presents me with unique challenges. That being said, I have done my best to use this obstacle to my advantage, focusing on my strengths. Thank you for your time.