

Autism Speaks

The need for consistency and a cure

BY LAUREN BUSKIRK

“I would like to have two eggs, sunny side up. But not runny, OK? ...And then I would like to have French pancakes... with the fruit topping on the side.”

An easy request, right? It would have been for Sam’s typical waitress. However, Sam had taken his daughter to a new restaurant, Big Boy instead of IHOP, after her pleas to try something new. He was used to having the same waitress, two eggs sunny side up, and an order of French pancakes with fruit topping on the side every Wednesday – the epitome of consistency. Sam, an autistic man who raises his young daughter, is the main character of the 2001 award-winning blockbuster *I Am Sam*.

Tears strolled down my mother’s face and mine as we watched Sam become emotionally and physically upset after the waitress told him they did not have what he ordered. He was trying so hard for his daughter, but he struggled to adapt to the change in routine.

The scene felt all too familiar. My 18-year-old cousin, Tyler, has gone to Richards Restaurant with my grandparents for breakfast every Saturday morning for years. The waitress brings him his glass of orange juice, scrambled eggs, two slices of toast, and sausage without asking. The waitress knows Tyler by name, and his order by heart. Both Tyler and his 15-year-old sister, Morgan, have autism.

According to the Autism Association of America, “Autism is a



Tyler Runyan, age 18, after his high school graduation.

complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first two years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Both children and adults on the autism spectrum typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities.”

With two autistic cousins, I have witnessed characteristics of autism firsthand. Autism affects the way individuals perceive the world and makes communication and social interaction difficult. It is very common for people with autism to have repetitive behaviors or intense interests. For example, Sam is entranced with The Beatles. Tyler is always chewing mint gum, fidgeting with squishy toys, and watching the same DVD over and over. Morgan loves to tear paper, touch different textures she encounters, and attempts to steal the

movie Tyler is watching to play on repeat in her own DVD player.

Individuals with autism have varying levels of severity and combinations of autistic traits and symptoms. Some autistic individuals can lead independent and relatively normal lives. However, others, such as my cousin Morgan, may never talk and have severe symptoms that hinder their ability to communicate, learn, interact socially, or live on their own.

After Tyler was diagnosed with autism, my aunt and uncle learned all they could about Autism. They were told autism was not hereditary. After Morgan was born, they quickly discovered she had a more severe case of autism than Tyler. However, there is still no proof that autism is caused genetically. In fact, the cause of autism is still unknown, which also means that there is currently no cure for autism.

Autism is the fastest-growing serious developmental disability in the U.S. and now affects 1 in 110 children and 1 in 70 boys. More children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with AIDS, diabetes, and cancer combined, yet autism receives less than 5% of the research funding of many less prevalent childhood diseases.

Tyler, Morgan, others living with autism, and the families and friends of those with autism need help spreading awareness, gaining support, raising funding, and conducting research about autism. Most importantly, we need to find a cure. By working together we can help improve the lives of those with autism, and as Sam would say, "that's a wonderful choice."