

ENDURING

The Authentically Autistic Newsletter

VOICES

Issue #1

Written and Compiled by
The Autism on a Deeper Level
Peer-Support Group



Associated with the Caroline Huber
Wellness Center



Introduction

By Goop Ring

Thank you for reading the very first issue of *Enduring Voices: The Authentically Autistic Newsletter!*

My name is Goop Ring, I am the facilitator and co-creator of the Autism on a Deeper Level Peer-Support Group for autistic adults. While titled a newsletter, this publication is a collection of creative work produced and shared by members of the Autism on a Deeper Level Peer Support Group.

This newsletter came about from a desire between support group members and myself to carve a space for autistic voices to be heard within the Brookdale community, especially during April, Autism Acceptance Month. It is far too often that autistic voices are overlooked, especially during what is meant to be our month, we yearn to be heard, to be listened to.

In reading this newsletter you are giving us your ear, and we thank you for it, it means more than you know.

Not including this introduction, this issue of *Enduring Voices* is home to eight submissions, all of which are made by our members.

All of these submissions speak to their authors' personalities, thoughts, and feelings, each of them used this space to say what they wished to say, they are all wonderful and important in their own ways.

This project serves as a spiritual successor to an existing newsletter, *Our Voice*, a newsletter started in 1992 by Autism Network International (ANI), an organization founded by autistic advocates Jim Sinclair, Donna Williams, and Xenia Grant, the founding of ANI and the release of the first issue of *Our Voice* mark the beginning of the autism acceptance movement, we would not be where we are now without the foundational work of ANI.

Within these pages, you will find a range of expressions—including poems, comics, quotes, short stories, and illustrations—all created to amplify the voices of those in our community. Through this work, we aim not only to reflect our shared experiences, but also to inspire, connect with, and encourage others beyond our group.

***Meeting dates every Thursday
from 11:30AM - 1:00PM in MAN 102***

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Special Thank Yous

To my friends and colleagues at the Wellness Center, who have supported me, the support group, and this newsletter every frantic, ambitious step of the way. Our director, Summer Deaver, has this habit of saying yes to all the lofty, over-ambitious things I ask to do, and I am eternally grateful for it.

Our associate director, GiAnna Rossano, provided vital feedback and finishing touches on design and format.

To Will Middleton for illustrating the title for this newsletter.

To Reed for the illustration accompanying Dinner and a Show.

To the Autism on a Deeper Level Peer-Support Group, for your time and dedication each week to uplifting and supporting one another, and for your contributions to projects like this.

Roll For Acceptance: Autism & TTRPGs

An article by Mercury Catanzarite

The tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* has had a major revival in mainstream media in the 2020s, between *Stranger Things*' plot revolving around it and actual play podcasts like *Critical Role & Dimension20* showing what the game looks like at its best. It's no wonder, then, that people have swarmed to play this game en masse.

That includes autistic people, who have found a game that's both stimulating and forgiving of different autistic traits. The mechanics can apply to a large number of fantastical worlds and can be tweaked for many more, giving an easy way to implement special interests into any campaign. The combat is turn-based, giving as much time as needed to think through your turn and follow different strategies. For those who are more inclined towards roleplay (like myself), it's the perfect low-stakes sandbox for practicing social interactions with a clear set of rules. Wizards of the Coast itself, or at least its game designers, have recognized this, and around November 2023, they introduced the world of *D&D*'s first autistic character.

Asteria

Asteria is a former princess and current paladin (holy warrior), with an affinity for astronomy and a deep friendship with a medusa named Euryale. She was introduced in *The Book of Many Things*, a book breathing new life into the legendary item called the Deck of Many Things. She is the book's narrator, writing her own notes in the margins of the pages about how she obtained the original Deck. She's also autistic.

This was a happy accident according to Makenzie De Armas, the game designer who drew on her own experiences as an autistic person to flesh her out. In an interview on *D&D Beyond* with Alyssa Visscher, De Armas explained that Asteria being autistic was first shelved, as she didn't want the main character's disability to be seen as a shortcut in the story to explain her friendship with Euryale. As they developed Asteria's story more and more, however, De Armas realized that her entire story of defying rigid expectations and defining her own story was "a deeply autistic experience", and from there, it was set in stone.

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While the word “autistic” is never said in the book, likely due to the lack of modern science in the book’s setting, Asteria’s existence is still a wonderful start to more explicit representation of autistic experiences within the TTRPG community. *Dungeons & Dragons* isn’t the only TTRPG in existence, though, and it surely isn’t the only one with these kinds of social and mechanical benefits. What TTRPGs can autistic folks see themselves in? Better yet, what TTRPGs are written *by* autistic folks?

The Autistic Experience, Gamified

One of my personal favorite games to point to for games about the autistic experience is rather niche, pulling from mythology. *Strange Changeling Child* was written by Lexi The Fae and costs \$8. It can be found at lexi-the-fae.itch.io/strange-changeling-child. This is a simple one-player TTRPG— it requires only a pencil, a piece of paper, and two distinct six-sided dice—

but this makes it even more accessible for who it’s about. The game uses changelings, strange fairies from Celtic myths who replace human children, as a metaphor for autism, which fits perfectly due to the myth’s history. Signs of a changeling vary between myths, but broadly, they’re shapeshifters with intelligence & behavior that does not match their supposed age, either being far ahead of or behind their peers. Changelings were likely an explanation of neurodivergent children in historical Celtic culture, due to the similarities between neurodivergent traits and changeling traits. Unfortunately, changelings were commonly seen as a curse, so these children were put through severe trauma to “drive the changeling out”. This game uses that history and asks, “What if that was all true?” You play as a changeling who has yet to tell their loved ones about their nature, but it’s only a matter of time before they find out. When they do, will they accept you, or will they try to suppress you all over again?

Roll For Acceptance: Autism & TTRPGs

An article by Mercury Catanzarite

If you're itching for something with room for more people that has a similar energy to *Strange Changeling Child*, there's a game for that. *PARA* was written by Eerie Games and costs \$15 (for the PDF). It can be found at eeriegames.com/products/para. Quite fittingly, it uses tarot cards for its mechanics. This game follows a group of magically inclined people, walking alongside the more ordinary students at Hastur College. Just when the characters rejoice in finding people like them, their world is turned upside down. There's cryptic visions, and then people start disappearing. Through it all, it's clear that there's more to this college than meets the eye. The group now has to face both the horrors of the college's sinister history and the judgement of their peers, figuring out this mystery or facing the consequences. I have yet to play this game myself, but the description of it is deeply relatable to my own experiences of tending to stick closer with other autistic or neurodivergent people, and facing judgement from others for our collective weirdness as a result. Of course, these two games are both supernatural fantasy with a darker

tone to it, often bordering on horror. Autism isn't purely pain and suffering, though, so I have a final, more lighthearted system for this list. *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* was written by Evil Hat Games and costs \$15 (for the PDF). It can be found at evilhat.com/product/thirsty-sword-lesbians/. Alternatively, the book's reference document (what allows other game designers to use a system's mechanics for their own game) is available for free at poweredbylesbians.com. As the name states, this is a game about queerness, and to be more specific, it's about telling queer stories where melee combat is not only frequent but also an *incredible* way to connect with your opponent in more ways than one. Of course, autistic people have a higher likelihood of identifying with the LGBTQ+ community, but I *mainly* recommend this system because of its social mechanics. *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* allows your character to gain Strings on people whenever they make a serious impression on them, whether it's positive or negative. You can later use these Strings to help or hinder that person, as well as making other abilities stronger!

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There's also at least four skills dedicated to different types of social interaction, each with listed effects to have on a success, in sharp contrast to D&D only having two with very minimal rules for how they're meant to be used. Because of the system's focus on emotional impact, it gives solid rules for interactions that are easy to follow, which can be incredibly helpful for an autistic person wanting to dip their toes into this game.

Autistic-Made TTRPGs

As for games made *by* autistic folks, let's start with a game that's strong in both its tone and its gameplay. *You Will Die In This Place* was created by Elizabeth Little, an autistic game designer leading Shrike Studio, and while it has not been published yet, the development preview is available for free at liz-shrikestudio.itch.io/you-will-die-in-this-place-free-preview. It's over 200 pages long already, though the final result will be around 250 pages. It's both a game and a story of its own, following two women named Charlotte & Samantha.

Charlotte is the fictional author of the survival-horror game *inside*, with plenty of lore written about a decaying kingdom and the dungeon they send their exiles to die in. She went missing before finishing the game, however, leaving her college friend Samantha to pick up the pieces for publication— with the help of an editor, of course, who seems intent on ripping any personal themes away. It can be a complicated read by itself, but from what I've seen so far, *Little* will make both the game and the meta-narrative something satisfying by its publication. *Little's* work might be too heavy for your own tastes, but there are also cozier games that can be played by anyone. *Yazeba's Bed & Breakfast* was created in part by Jay Dragon, an autistic game designer for Possum Creek Games, and costs \$25. It can be found at possumcreekgames.itch.io/yazeba-s-bed-breakfast. This slice-of-life game follows a bed & breakfast run by a heartless witch named Yazeba, where it's always September 15th and the community is always building upon itself.

Roll For Acceptance: Autism & TTRPGs

An article by Mercury Catanzarite

The characters are premade, with a choice between 7 major characters and over 30 minor characters, so players never need to worry about thinking up something new. In particular, the major character Amelie is a strict robot whose character arc of finding herself is heavily reminiscent of autistic experiences. If you do feel like creating a new chapter or guest, though, the book is open-ended enough to allow for it with grace. The chapters are also quick to understand, and with new information being unlocked as play continues, a campaign using this system could sustain itself for years. As a final pick for autistic-made games, I've decided to honor a late and great autistic developer. *Relics: A Game of Angels* was created in part by Steve Darlington, an autistic developer for Tin Star Games, and costs \$35 (for the PDF). It can be found at tinstargames.com/relics. This game follows a group of fallen angels, who are trapped on Earth since the gates to Heaven have permanently closed. Powerful relics have existed throughout human history, and the group must collect these relics to keep them away from their enemies.

If you control these relics, you control the world— but first, you need to find them. This game uses a flashback mechanic, showing the group's history together and allowing the characters to become unreliable narrators of their own past. What will you find, both mentally and physically, in this game?

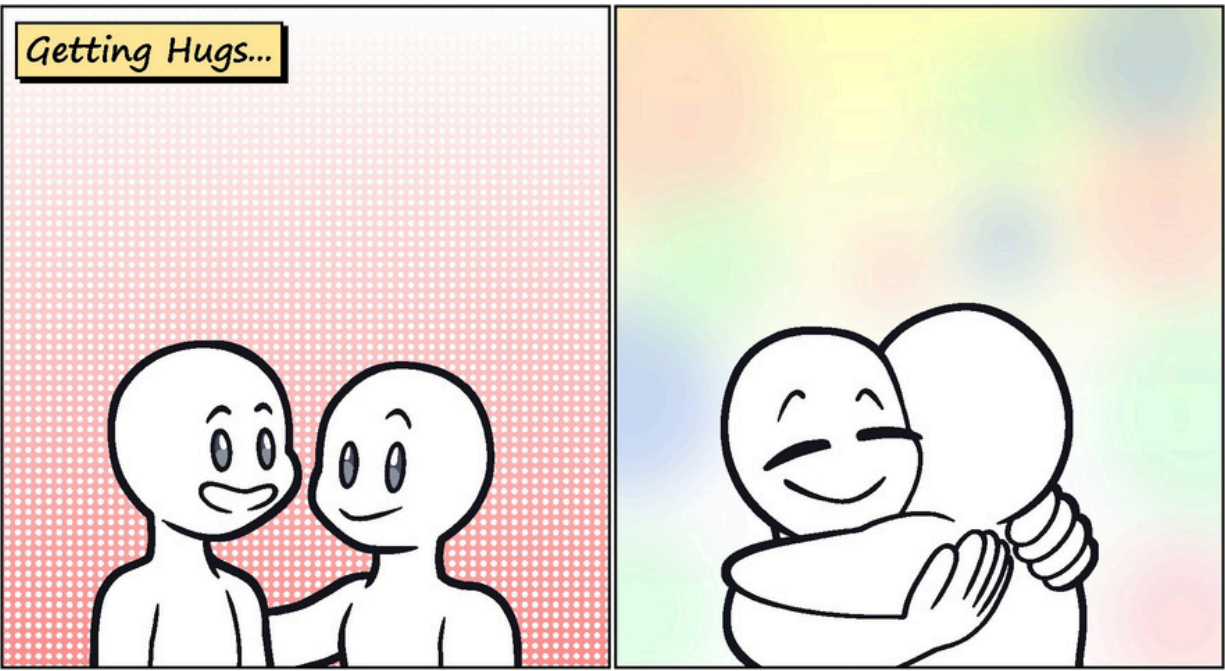
Steve Darlington passed away on January 2nd, 2026, and briefly mentioned his autism in his final Tin Star Games Patreon post, "Just Do Something", published on December 30, 2025. May he rest in peace. If you like my description of Relics, feel free to support Peter Blake (the remaining half of the company) by buying it or any of their other games yourself.

There are also plenty of autistic game developers who I didn't have space to mention here, or who aren't open about their autistic identity at all. If you're an autistic person looking for somewhere to get started in regards to TTRPGs, though, I hope my list helped you decide what you may or may not be into and what games might help accommodate you!

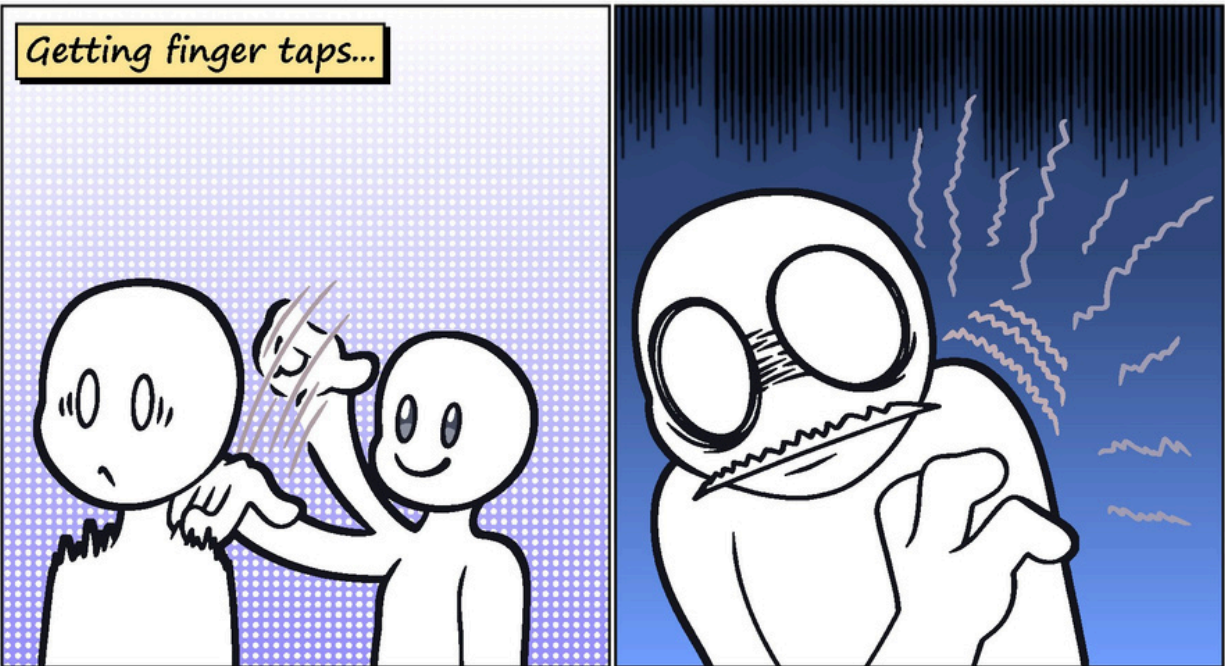
That Neuro Life

A Comic by Will Middleton

Getting Hugs...



Getting finger taps...



Quotes

Compiled by Christopher Marrow

“We need to change perceptions, not Autistic people” - Greta Thunberg



"The world needs all kinds of minds."
- Temple Grandin, PH.D

"Autism is not a tragedy.
Ignorance is the tragedy."
-Kerry Magro



Neurodiversity Club

Written By Jacob Leiser

As a student on the autism spectrum at Brookdale Community College, my experience has been both challenging and empowering. College can be overwhelming for anyone, but for neurodivergent students it can come with additional obstacles such as navigating social situations, managing sensory overload, and adjusting to new routines. Over time, however, Brookdale has become a place where I have been able to grow, learn more about myself, and connect with others who share similar experiences. This is what led me to create a club on campus where other Autistic students can feel welcome. The goal of the Neurodiversity Club is for neurodivergent and autistic students on campus to connect, socialize, attend student events, and build meaningful friendships with other neurodivergent and neurotypical Brookdale students. The club provides a welcoming and supportive environment where students can be themselves without feeling pressured to mask who they are. Whether students want to share experiences, meet new people, or simply relax in a space where they feel understood, the Neurodiversity Club aims to create that sense of belonging that is missing to autistic people at Brookdale.

Dinner and a Show

A short story by Goop Ring



*Illustration by reed_you_guess on Instagram!

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Charlotte let go of her spoon, it stuck out of her stew like a sword in its sheath waiting for its master to be ready to fight again. The stew marked a formidable opponent, it was new, it was strange, it was different, Charlotte's face contorted and her neck twitched with each bite as she tried to get used to the sensations in her mouth. The warm, meaty dish Charlotte was faced with was a clear upgrade from the watery messes of carrots and potatoes the orphanage would often call "stew," but she yearned for the familiarity of what she grew up eating. She looked up from the table and at the tavern around her, a brief reprieve from trading blows with her adversary. The place was run down, though still busy with a cacophony of voices and the smell of alcohol filling the room, it was hard to make out one voice within the sea of flirting, arguing, and the bard's violin. The only truly quiet thing in the room was Charlotte, the only communication she gets being uncomfortable glances that always go from the horns towering over the top of her head, to her eyes, then quickly away to

something else entirely, she was used to it. She tried to focus on the sound of the violin as she mixed her stew around with her spoon, knowing she'd lose her fight if the thick liquid settled enough to develop a crust, then the music stopped, and even that slight reprieve was gone. She brought her eyes to the bowl, and once again tried to reduce her world to her own table.

"You! You with the horns!"

But she couldn't.

Charlotte looked up, the bard on stage was pointing at her, and the rest of the room felt completely silent.

"I need your help, could you come up here with me?" The bard asks, beckoning Charlotte to come on stage.

Charlotte slowly stood up and tried her best not to panic as she walked through the tavern, keeping her hands locked together close to her chest. When she made it up onto the stage, she couldn't resist looking down at all the eyes staring back at her. She was barely even thinking about the bard, focusing more on the idea of becoming a spectacle to throw peanuts at.

Dinner and a Show

A short story by Goop Ring

“What are you looking over there for silly? All I see is a wall!” The bard made a quick knocking motion with her arm as if there were a wall there, somehow the sound of the knock reverberated through the tavern. Charlotte, now acknowledging the bard was even there, finally got a good look at the person that got her into this mess.

This bard was much shorter than Charlotte, though that isn't saying much. She had a sweet smile plastered on her face and round glasses resting on her pointed ears accented by big blue eyes. Her short white hair was matched by her outfit, being a tunic, pair of pants, and boots held together with a corset and a belt, all in white and somewhat covered by a purple cloak that went down to her ankles. She had a pointed striped hat much like Charlotte's though the bard's was much bigger compared to the flat one that was impaled through her horns, more resembling a top hat. The bard removed her hat and flipped it upside down, then held it out towards Charlotte, looking up at her.

“My friend lives in my hat, and he only comes out for the magic words! ...and he doesn't like to listen to me sometimes... could you help?” The bard asked, tilting her head as she asked her little question.

“O-okay.” Charlotte gave a shaky nod with a little smile on her face that she couldn't tell if she was forcing or not.

“Thanks! I need you to say ‘hocus pocus’ right into the hat, okay?” The bard tilted her hat towards her volunteer.

“H-hocus pocus.” Charlotte said in a hushed tone, though she leaned in a bit toward the hat. “Perfect! Now I'll bring him out!” The bard stuck her arm into her hat, it went in much deeper than it looked like it should and she turned her head away as she dug around. “Hmmm...” She pulled her arm out, her hand still empty as it moved up to scratch her head. “Huh... I can't find him. Could you call him again for me? Maybe he didn't hear...” She held the hat towards Charlotte again.

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“Hocus pocus.” Charlotte spoke towards the hat again, now at a more average speaking volume, and then expectantly looked back at the bard.

“Wonderful! Thank you! Okay! Now I’m gonna bring him out!” The bard stuck her arm in and dug around again, she even stuck her tongue out in her efforts, but her hand came up empty again, and she let out a sigh. “Could you give me a second?”

Before Charlotte could even respond, the bard held a large breath and stuck her face into her hat, she moved her head around for a few seconds as Charlotte watched with her arms hugging herself, subtly rubbing her left arm with her right hand.

Suddenly, the bard started to pull the hat off, she pulled it twice to no avail, her arms quivering from the effort of pulling it off before a third tug made her head fly back as it popped out of the hat. She finally let out the big breath she was holding, and continued to breathe audibly for a moment.

“I need another favor.” She looks up at Charlotte with a closed-mouth smile and slightly narrowed eyes.

“Could you just... yell the magic words? As loud as you can! Just go for it!” The bard held her hat up close to Charlotte’s face, prompting her to yell into it.

Charlotte leaned a little to her left to look past the hat and at the bard, who gave her a little nod with that full smile she’s had for most of the time Charlotte had been looking at her. She straightened herself out again, and looked into the hat.

“Hocus pocus!” She yelled at a moderate volume after mustering up whatever courage she could from the bard’s unbridled confidence.

The bard quickly brought her hat down and stuck her arm into it, once again digging for her friend. “...We got him.” The bard said as she looked back up at Charlotte with a determined smirk. She pulled out her little friend, a gray rabbit that was rubbing his eyes. The rabbit had a purple bow around his neck and a white tuft of hair on his head, it looked almost perfect, like it had been drawn. Charlotte found the rabbit about as cute as the bard in front of her.

Dinner and a Show

A short story by Goop Ring

A slight smile mixed in with her slight panic as she looked at the bard's huge grin and wide eyes directed straight at Charlotte, proud of their work. The bard raised the rabbit slightly, flipped her hat rightside up and placed him on top of it, he sat upright almost akin to a person.

"Now what did I tell you about napping during the show? I thought we agreed you would sleep at night from now on!" The bard exclaimed with her eyebrows furrowed at the rabbit, who responded by climbing up onto her shoulder and whispering into her ear, she then turned her head to face the rabbit with a confused look. "You can't sleep at night because of all the noise- I DO NOT SNORE **THAT** LOUD!" The bard placed her fingertips on her chest and raised her voice at the rabbit who put his hand near his mouth, laughing a little as the audience erupted in a fit of laughter as well. Charlotte glanced over to the people below as she got the urge to laugh herself, she let out a small chuckle before darting her eyes back on the bard and her rabbit as she began to scold him again.

"You're lucky you got the audience laughing or you'd be in big trouble mister!" The rabbit jumped back down onto the bard's hat where he proceeded to bow to the audience and turned and bowed to Charlotte specifically, she gave him a nod, unsure if she was supposed to like the rabbit or not. He turned to the bard again and stuck his tongue out at her, who responded by sticking her tongue out back, the rabbit then jumped into the air as the bard quickly flipped the hat over so he fell back into it as she put it back on her head.

"Y'know you can never get good help around here!" She said with a sigh before looking back up at Charlotte. "Well aside from you! You were wonderful! Can we get a hand for my volunteer here?" The bard said as she and a few scattered audience members started to clap.

Charlotte looked on at the small applause she was getting, she could feel some blood rushing into her cheeks. She didn't know if she should smile, take a bow, or just take it all in, she ended up standing there, letting the noise bounce off of her until it subsided.

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The bard sent Charlotte back to her table with a pat on the shoulder, she sat down and looked at her stew again, already knowing she lost her fight. It was probably cold by now, but as the violin started to play again she thought of all the things that could've happened to it while she was away, perhaps somebody spat in it, or took a bite with her spoon, whatever it was, it made her lose her appetite even more, so she looked back up at the bard. Charlotte was mesmerized by the little show, the bard was playing her heart out on that violin of hers, putting a lot of energy into an upbeat and cheery tune. She still held that smile as she sang and swayed through her songs. Her music was about as adorable as the rabbit was, it was bright and optimistic, each lyric delivering some simple message that wouldn't be out of place in the picture books in the orphanage. Charlotte sat and watched for a long time, possibly an hour or two, until the bard got to the end of yet another song and turned to the bartender. "Is that enough or do you need me to keep going?"

She asked him with that smile, she didn't even look that tired.

"You need 'er to keep goin'?" The bartender asked, facing Charlotte. "Huh?" Charlotte looked around and realized she was the last customer in the tavern, maybe it had been a little more than an hour or two. "Oh... n-no, it's okay, she can stop."

"Whew!" The bard hopped off the small stage and sat across from Charlotte at her table. "You were really great up there, y'know?"

Charlotte jumped back a little in her seat as the bard sat with her without warning. "Oh- uh- thank you." Charlotte paused before realizing she should probably compliment back. "You were great too, of course."

"Why thank you! So what's your name?" The bard asked.

"Charlotte... uh- Just Charlotte." Charlotte responded, anticipating that she'll have to explain her lack of last name yet again. "What's yours?"

"I'm Goop!" The bard exclaimed, "Are you from around here?"

Charlotte shook her head, silently thankful for the bard's lack of curiosity.

Dinner and a Show

A short story by Goop Ring

“Me neither, I’ve been traveling all around, you know, bard stuff!” Goop chuckled.

“Oh, yeah.” Charlotte replied, though she didn’t actually know.

“I saw you picking at that stew my whole show, is it not good?” Goop asked, pointing to the cold stew Charlotte had all but forgotten about by now.

“I-It’s probably fine, I think it’s just me.” Charlotte looked down at her stew, every second it got progressively less appetizing to her.

“Huh... well you still must be hungry! Here, give me one second.” Goop said before getting up and walking over to the bar. She and the bartender spoke for a second, though he had a weird look on his face he went into the back and handed Goop what she asked for.

“This always helps me when I can’t find anything I like.” Goop remarked as she placed a glass of milk on the table and slid it toward Charlotte. “It doesn’t really replace a full meal but it’ll get you fuller than you would’ve been! Oh— and try not to drink it too fast.”

Goop was right, Charlotte was still hungry despite not being able to even look at her stew, but the milk beckoned to her. She drank it all up pretty quickly despite the bard’s advice, the milk was simple, it tasted like milk, it went down easy, nothing like the untamable beast she was trying to eat before. They spoke for a good while after that, though a pronounced yawn and stretch from Goop and the drowsy feeling Charlotte got after her glass of milk prompted both of them to turn it in for the night, leaving each other to their separate rooms in the upstairs inn. Charlotte didn’t exactly go to bed that night full, but she wasn’t hungry either, the fight with her adversary ended in a draw.

Dear audience,

An anonymously submitted poem

I shyly wave as curtains rise
You've saved a seat for me at lunch
Watching my performance
As I try to force myself to speak

I hear fifty people yelling at once
My brain and voice freeze in place
When our corner of chaos falls silent,
I blurt out, "I used to really love tape"

It might've been funny with context
Which I swallowed before I said
You act as if I did something wrong
And I feel like I don't belong

So I don't try to talk again
A boring show, you turn it off
And I beg for another chance
If I must talk more, I'll try my best

I change my personality
When I get bored of it like you did
I don't know who I am anymore,
Just know I must be interesting

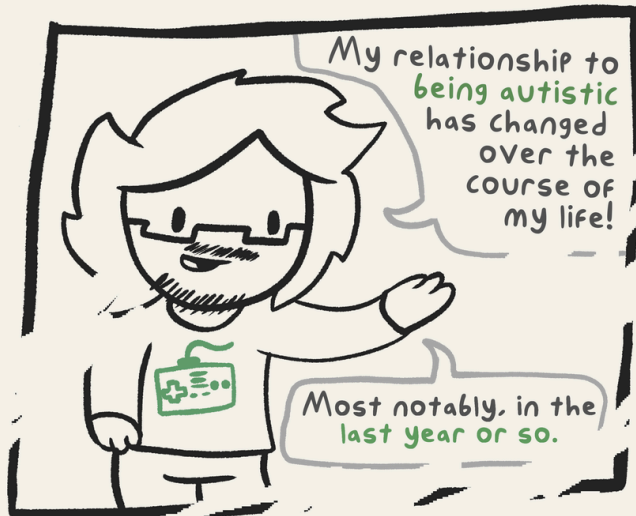
I put myself on the internet
And never disappear from it
From the safety of my house,
I'll make this show one that you like

I hope to be irresistible,
You love watching it backfire.
But after years, I win you over
I'm pretty, funny, perfectly unique,

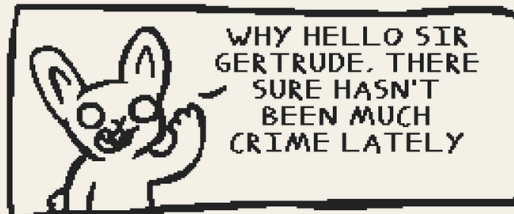
But you can never know all of me,
The part of me you didn't love.
And I can never be at peace,
You only clap when I perform.

Autismcomic.png

A comic by Jack Barlow

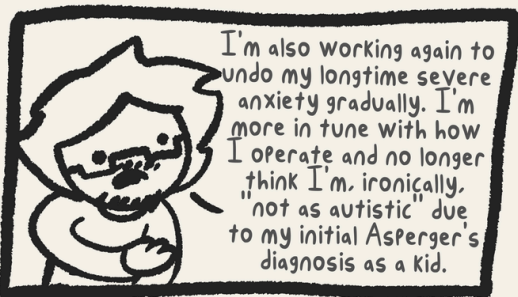
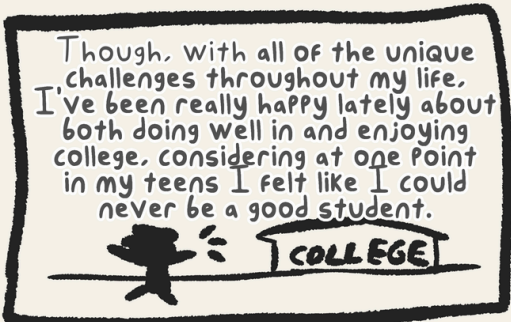
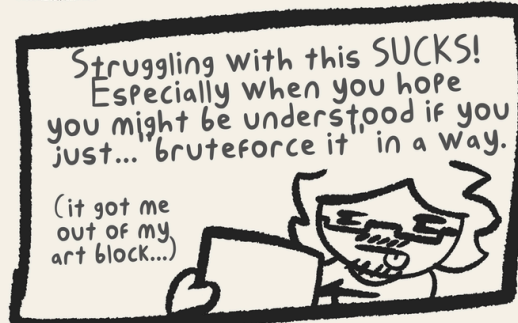
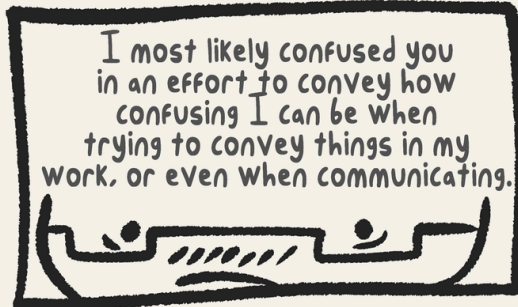
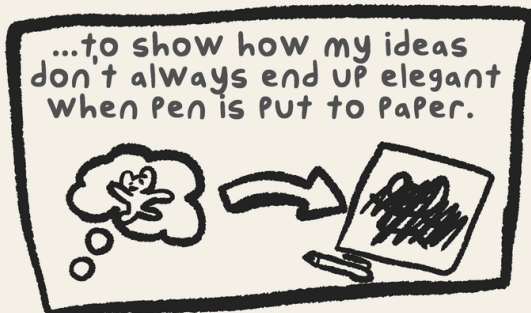
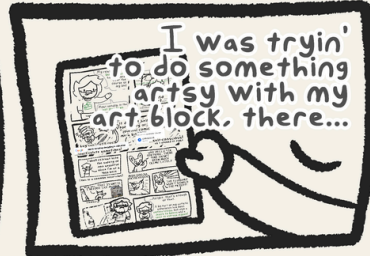


(this is a common occurrence)



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I Think I Am Pretty Interesting

A Short Memoir by Megan Martin

Ever since I was younger, I always felt excluded from my peers. Often, kids my age considered me “weird” since my actions were considered to be strange to most people. I liked things done in a specific way to doing activities or having lunch at the same time. I was routine oriented and if something interrupted my routine, it would be the end of the world. I also get fixated on a TV show or movie that I constantly talk and think about nonstop. I just knew something was off about me but I couldn't put my finger on it. I was diagnosed with autism when I was a toddler but I don't have any recollection. When I was about seven or eight, my parents sat me down and told me that I had autism, my entire world flipped upside down. Fortunately for me, my aunt who I called “Nini” who took care of me while my parents were working, saw me outside of my disability as she didn't think I was any less than the other kids. She always saw the greatest potential in me even though I didn't always see what she saw. I vividly remember her helping me with my reading, writing, and pronunciation on her cool kitchen countertop. It all clicked for me, my diagnosis made sense.

I was placed in special education classes, given occupational therapy and speech therapy to help overcome some of my challenges. In elementary school, I was faced with adversity from school staff. I had mannerisms which many paraprofessionals would scold me for like spinning around in circles or repeating certain lines from cartoons I watched. Later on, I found out this behavior was called Stimming and the repetition of phrases was called Echolalia. My biggest issue was emotional dysregulation which eventually led to uncontrollable outbursts. At one point, that happened daily for lengthy periods of time because I didn't have any learned coping skills. Throughout my time in elementary school, I was often finding myself in conflicts with paraprofessionals also known as aides.

One of them, Miss Linda, called me “stupid” right in my face. I ended up repeating what she said to Nini and she and my mom got involved with the school principal to address how I was being treated. In the end, Miss Linda got fired for how she treated me and other students.

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The Authentically Autistic Newsletter

Another aide, Miss Eileen, whenever I was repeating a line I heard, she would talk down to me and say “Megan, no silly talk. She wasn’t as bad as Miss Linda but her comments still hurt me because she didn’t really understand me. Throughout third and fourth grade, I was the only girl in a classroom full of boys. It made me feel alienated since I was a girl and everyone else diagnosed with my condition in my classes were all boys. Finally, after a lot of advocating from my mom I got placed in general education during fifth grade. I felt like I finally had the chance to be a “normal” kid. Unfortunately, it did not last long because I couldn’t keep up with the pace of the class leading to even more emotional outbursts. Soon after I graduated fifth grade I was placed back in special education.

Middle school came along, I began to feel more self conscious, it was embarrassing being in special education with paraprofessionals constantly hovering over me like vultures over a carcass, it was commonplace to be underestimated,

and be treated like an absolute infant instead of a regular person with thoughts, feelings and ambitions.

Heading into seventh grade, Nini and her husband who we call Pop moved down to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina which was a sad time for me. It was a difficult change since I was no longer going to be dropped off at her house to go to school anymore, I wasn’t going to have Pop’s delicious chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast anymore, and Nini wasn’t going to straighten my hair before school like she used to. With everything going on in my life, I began to hate myself, projecting my internalized feelings onto my peers, envying people who could easily socialize with others if it was a walk in the park, to me they seemed to have some form of superiority over me because things seemed to be so easy for them. I wanted all that but everything seemed to be a struggle for me, I wanted so badly to just feel normal that it hurt.

By eighth grade, I finally gained some maturity as I didn’t have many emotional outbursts,

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I was working hard on regulating my emotions, understanding my triggers and learning to de-escalate when I got upset.

The clock struck 2020, “This was going to be my year” or so I thought. The pandemic came along, classes were now virtual, everyone went into quarantine just for “two weeks”, that became months.

Because of the pandemic, the boat trip which I was very much looking forward to was canceled and graduation had to be virtual at home. But there was a light at the end of the tunnel, I graduated middle school and now the next big step in my journey was High School! So my freshman year had an interesting start, school was virtual until it was spring. Then it was safe to open up schools again but everyone was required to wear masks. During that same year, the school hours were shortened to 1pm when school typically ended around 3pm since there was no lunch so no way to socialize. I met a few people but I didn't find my friend group until sophomore year. It was refreshing to meet people with the same interests as me but also with the same struggles.

To me, the best kind of friendships were the ones with whom I never thought would ever be friends and somehow the two of us just connect. Although there were still more boys in classes than girls, it was nice to see more girls than ever before.

At the time, I learned more about autism by watching videos on TikTok of actual autistic people sharing their stories to millions of people online. It made me think, how would younger me react to these videos, to know I wasn't alone, to know what it is like to be misunderstood by others, to deal with the consequences of a prejudiced society. I also researched the reasons why men were more frequently diagnosed than women, the commonly accepted reasons being genetics factors or medical gender bias for women leading to later diagnosis or even misdiagnosis.

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While in high school, I had friends who supported and accepted me as a person first, without seeing me as disabled. I had teachers and paraprofessionals who were much nicer to me than the ones in the past, who acknowledged that I am an intelligent, compassionate, funny, and hardworking person. I eventually accepted myself without realizing it, only to come to the realization that autism was just another part of me just like the color of my eyes and that it didn't define me. I was still keeping in touch with Nini through all the years after she moved. The one positive thing about her move is that it gave me some room for personal growth but also helped me to reach out to my community of people. Today even with more awareness and research, people still believe that autism is a horrible disease that needs to be cured or eradicated. If I was ever given the choice to get rid of my autism, I would decline that offer because despite its flaws and challenges, I don't think I'd be the same person I am today. And I think I am pretty interesting.

Had no word for these feelings, looked at the fire and knew
The word was “consumed”. I felt consumed.

I’m on the verge. On the verge of a step.
It’s just a step but my mind says “do or die”, “do or die”,
With the word “DIE” in big letters to scare me off and tell me not to try

I wish I was in awe of, blinded to stare only at the word “do”.
I wish the fire within me was one of motivation and not of self consumption,
Shrinking, shrivelling, tumbling back on myself,
In the face of that big word “DIE”.

Come to rescue fear please anger.
We will turn outwards. We will scream, “it’s not fair” and break outwards
We will carry sadness away from the blackness of unsalvageable forever.
We will survive.

And here lies the greatest sadness.
For in the light I came to see, there was no “we”.
I was alone.

The only answer, the only safe place to go,
lay in reaching outward and upward, to the next step.

Donna Williams,
Our Voice Newsletter, Autism Network International,
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