

“Becoming Aware of Autism”

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Now more than ever Cheyney University needs to care more about how we communicate with those that are different. Often when we speak to somebody who has a condition that is unfamiliar, we worry about saying the wrong thing. This happens a lot to people with disabilities, especially those with autism. To help bring awareness to the autistic spectrum on Cheyney’s campus, I decided to write this post.

To begin, I want you to imagine a baby boy named Michael. He was born with two eyes and two feet. He had control over all the functions of his body. Unfortunately, at the age of two he stopped talking until he was four years old. This may seem random but this happens to many children in America before they are diagnosed as autistic. Not until these children are tested and diagnosed by a doctor do their parents fully understand why they don’t speak or act in a traditional way. Even after their diagnosis, there are still so many questions and uncertainty. The main thing to know is that people with autism are just like you, they just interact with the world in a different way.

Anyone can be autistic; it is not something that can be seen just from looking at someone. You must educate yourself, listen to them, and be patient. Autistic students like Michael usually begin facing challenges from their diagnosis immediately. This happens around middle school where most autistic children cannot do what others are doing because of certain problems that result from being misunderstood. These challenges grow throughout puberty, high school, and living in an environment like

Cheyney where autism awareness is not the most common.

In order to better interact with autistic people, we must better understand them.

To begin, autism is not just a one size fits all definition. It is actually a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. The three levels of the autistic spectrum are high functioning, middle level (PDD), and severe autism. High functioning in autism especially in children is that they can retain memory in school when they learn, but lack social skills and communication. Middle level (PDD) in the autistic spectrum can be both high functioning and low functioning, based on the challenges they have in their daily routines. This happens especially when they are in school as students, they do not focus. Severe autism is the biggest challenge. These students are treated differently than other students in schools, they do not go on the same buses as other students and they don't have the same level of academics as other students. In a number of studies focusing on experience and support of autistic college students, autistic individuals were reported to be bullied and marginalized in universities. Personally, being a high functioning autistic student at Cheyney can be really hard sometimes. During my freshman year, I felt like I was misunderstood and ignored by students, professors, and staff. I felt like there was a wall of understanding and acceptance missing between us. My peers did not understand my experience or my disability.

The only differences between a regular Cheyney student and someone with high functioning autism is their level of observation, social sensitivity and the speed of their words. Because those with high functioning autism interact with the world differently, we need more time and patience from myself and my professors to finish my work. I will

say, things have gotten so much better since my freshman year. Once my professors took the time to understand my accommodations and my peers stopped making fun of my speech and took time to listen, I was able to make friends at Cheyney. Especially through soccer games.

The way students and professors interact with those with autism could be better. On the end of autistic students we could take deeper action by letting others know when we are overwhelmed or stressed out is by letting professors and tutors know that sometimes we need a break of five to ten times. Also there needs to be more communication for the professors on accepting our accommodations more which will increase our self-motivation and increase our potential.

Students can learn from any peer who has autism. Just how students with autism can learn from students without it. If you ever have a group project with a student with autism or work with them on an in-class activity remember to have a bit more patience, listen deeper, and try to understand that they are not that much different than you. Just as students have different levels of ambition, intelligence, and motivation, people also have different levels of learning.

To conclude, I want you to know it is not a taboo to have autism; it is just a new way of being. I want my peers to know that students with autism are as capable as anyone else. We just need the time to be understood.