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Mariah's Autism Story, Its ok to be different

My name is Mariah, and I am Autistic and 24 years old. I'm a big Christian and live in Wisconsin. I was born in Burnsville, Minnesota and entered the foster system at the age of 9. I finally was adopted in 2009 after moving from 3 different foster homes. I was then placed in services in middle school for those with disabilities and was there for 5 until I graduated high school. When others describe me, they describe me as a resilient, caring, enthusiastic, honest, and a highly empathetic person.

In the beginning of my life, it was tough as anyone can be. I unfortunately figured out I wasn't placed in a safe environment after a year and experienced a lot of trauma in my last home. I was verbally traumatized and experienced a lot of isolation. Aside from trauma, I felt misunderstood and experienced a lot of bullying, rejection and friendship struggles as well due to misunderstandings. Not knowing I had Autism during that time was a struggle. I was selectively mute and I had a hard time understanding the social rules in games and relationships, understanding jokes, humor, and knowing how to relate and connect with others without

experiencing anxiety and being overwhelmed. I coped by masking. I would stay by myself in quiet places in school and in a shell in my bedroom. During those times I would pray, read books, play my Nintendo DS, journal, and listen to music. I felt left out a lot and couldn't figure out how everyone adjusted and fit in so easily with everyone. I felt like an outcast. I didn't know the exact way to approach people. I tried getting involved but experienced continuous rejection and bullying. I knew I was a good person. Something wasn't right with the picture. I then fell into depression. I started regressing and My parents consulted health professionals. it was hard for them to figure what was going on. I feel doctors placed way to many labels on me for any person to have. I was misdiagnosed a lot of my life and figured out everything fit into one picture one day.

It wasn't until my early 20s when I moved out on my own that I received my Diagnosis of Autism. Before that time, I was given about 7 different diagnosis that kept changing. When I got diagnosed Autistic everything clicked and made sense to me. I learned I was just different then everyone else and there's nothing wrong with that. Girls tend to get misdiagnosed a lot in their lifetime. I learned from the psychologist who diagnosed me that not all individuals in society and doctors are always knowledgeable about Autism and how to diagnose it. Autism can look different in girls and is diagnosed more in boys which can lead to misdiagnosis. Moving foster homes and switching schools constantly didn't help the situation either. All I know for sure is that I finally felt whole and as strange as this might sound, my life made sense. I guess the greatest thing that came out of this is how I've been feeling my whole life has finally been validated. There was a reason behind everything I went through and being different isn't a bad thing if you look at it from a different lens.

Since out of my schooling, services, my adopted home and receiving a diagnosis my life has changed. I currently work at my new job at Culvers Restaurants. Thanks to Autism Speaks, I received a \$1,000 grant and will be currently working along with a coach through them. Ill be learning things like relational and independent living skills. Ill will be working on personal goals and finally will have the opportunity to connect with more adults on the spectrum like me. During my free time I talk to, study about and listen to music about Jesus. I connect with my new family and talk to my online friends and attend church activities and groups. I plan on going to college to study about Jesus and animals and plan on going to a missionary trip someday. I believe having a relationship with Jesus is important in my life and is my way of getting through difficulties and life in general. I also participate in Special Olympics and participating in Special Olympics has taught me about teamwork, resilience, respect, kindness, and inclusion as well.

Lastly, I wouldn't change being Autistic. I learned being Autistic is a big part of me. I'm just wired differently and that's not a bad thing. Autism makes me unique and stand out, makes me more accepting of others differences and makes me a loving empathetic person. I love that I can have the opportunity to meet people like me too. I was told I can have a sense of humor as well because I can make people laugh even without intentions too. Autism has helped me excel in repetitive tasks, creative thinking, observational skills, reliability and in practicing honesty and loyalty. I excel at repetitive tasks because it helps me focus on one thing and gives me routine and predictability. It helps me remain intensely focused on the tiniest of details. I think these skills can help employers view me as a good employee. Being super honest and reliable are always good qualities to have within the workplace and in life in general.

My main struggles today with being Autistic is the stigma surrounding it and how society views Autism. The lack of acceptance and a few executive dysfunction difficulties, sensory, social difficulties I face, including adjusting and the rigidity and unpredictability that collides with my daily activities like unexpected changes. I love to make new friends and meet new people especially those who take the time to understand me and who like the same interests I do. Making friends is still a struggle today but I continue to fight through it and I learned I'm not born to fit in but to stand out. I learned also as a follower of Jesus Christ I'll be rejected. I will also not change myself for anyone. I shouldn't have to mask my Autism and fit in with the world for people to like me. I'll continue to find my people who accept me as I am and keeping a small circle is perfectly fine with me. I'm grateful for the people I have in my life.

I truly believe that everything I have been through in my life – the struggles and trauma, the joyous moments like finding my family and friends and receiving an autism diagnosis – has put me exactly where I need to be in the world. I hope sharing my story like mine will help treat others kindly who are different and explain just few of the stories individuals with Autism have and obstacles they can face along with the positives that come from it. I'm hoping sharing these stories like this will also help realize how important it is to recognize girls with autism bring more acceptance and understanding into the Autism community and community at large.