

## **Finding Meaning through Experience and Encouragement**

Sam Serrano is on a path heading towards something incredible. He has had his fair share of detours in his life, but his faith has always been there to guide him. Along the way, he has learned perseverance, and developed a great sense of introspection. His experiences have naturally led him to help others. His new job as a case manager, allows him the opportunity to help others, and is, but one more stop on his way forward.

Sam deals with both ADHD and high functioning autism but has always approached them with a different outlook than most would expect. “In a way, it’s like the two of them canceled each other out. As weird as that sounds.” ADHD sends Sam’s mind in a thousand directions at once but has also made him more social. This social aspect has counteracted his isolationist tendencies that affect someone with autism. While the ability to focus on one thing—and possess an almost tunnel like vision—has helped him quiet his mind.

Sam was bullied as a teenager and a young adult. Nonverbal behavior was hard for him to interpret amongst other students. As a result, he was often lonely, bored and uncertain about what he wanted in life. This led him to act out by neglecting his studies and getting lost in the “It” crowd. “I never felt cool or like people wanted me and all of the sudden I was going with this group.” This led to some alcohol and drug abuse. “I knew the people I was with weren’t the best, but I was addicted to this lifestyle,” Sam says disappointedly. Sam found some reprieve when he left public school and was enrolled at Saint Matthew’s Lutheran school. It was here that he excelled academically and became more involved socially.

“It’s all thanks to my mom that I ended up where I am now.” She always did her best to keep Sam on track, despite any obstacles, including what he states are his own stubborn tendencies. Some people might attribute that up to autistic tendencies, but Sam says it’s just his personality. He is someone who looks to learn life lessons through experience. This has turned Sam into a critical thinker, a skill that he brings to every situation.

As an adult, Sam found religion. “My life changed when I became a Christian. Being different was tough and suddenly, I found this community of like minded people, all over the world.” This network helped him to make new friends and find fun activities to keep busy. This was when he embraced the role of generosity in life—a need to give back, freely, and without recompense.

It was through his mom, a social worker, that Sam was put in touch with ACCES-VR. They helped him throughout his college career, which took some ups and downs; first at NCCC, and then ECC, before he finally found his home at UB. They helped with his tuition and pay for books. UB remains a place where Sam hangs out. He really likes the silent study areas. He goes there when he needs to get work done for his job.

After graduating from UB with a BA in Health and Human Services, ACCES put him in contact with Andrea Todaro. Andrea understood Sam’s passion for helping others, and was the perfect guide, to show him the opportunities that would allow him to pursue that passion. Together, they began looking at job openings in the human services field. Andrea helped him do all the basics—resume, mass distribution, etc.—but her encouragement and Sam’s determination were the tools to his success. Sam took full advantage of Innovative Placement’s resources, and the results, more than speak for themselves.

Sam is now employed by Best Self which is a mental health provider with locations throughout Western New York. In this capacity as a care manager, he helps people struggling with mental health, as well as dealing with other (often financial) factors that contribute to their mental state. In this capacity, he provides initial and ongoing assessments of clients, including client history, evaluation, and diagnosis. He also develops initial and ongoing treatment plans which describe the goals of treatment and the methods. In addition, he provides integrated individual, family and group counseling and psychotherapy to assist clients in achieving their goals. Furthermore, Sam assists clients with linkages to appropriate community resources to enhance treatment and recovery. Finally, he contacts primary care physicians, insurance companies and other service providers involved in the care of clients. Sam routinely calls on the Christian tenets of doing good works and helping others. He recalled one day getting his morning coffee and noticing someone without warm winter gloves. He gladly gave up his own to help this person.

In addition to his employment, he remains part of the internship program he began during his time at UB. Bridges International is a program that helps international students become acclimated and find social involvement in the university setting. "It's a home away from home," for people from around the world. As a side benefit, Sam has increased his vocabulary in several major languages. This past Tuesday, they went ice skating as a group.

Although Sam has made many strides, he's particularly excited about his future. He would eventually like to pursue higher education, become certified as an ESL instructor, and travel around the world. Sam is someone who believes in other people and is always looking for the chance to help. He offers this advice to other young people in similar situations: "Persevere and overcome. Put yourself out there, and silence that negative voice of doubt, condemning you in your head. Life seems long, but it's really short. Whether you believe life has inherent meaning, or not, you can give it meaning."

***Martin Kilroy, writer Innovative Placements***