

**Temple Grandin:**  
**Tearing Down Perceptions of Autism**

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Paper  
Length: 2407

Throughout history, man has been faced with many challenges that blind the world, but the perseverance of humans always came through. Although we have surpassed almost every difficulty humankind has faced, some of our greatest mysteries come from within. In 1982, during a successful career in animal welfare, Temple Grandin challenged the approach to people with mental disabilities, which included alienation and institutionalism in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Grandin's actions as a successful adult with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) started the fight to make autism accepted and raised the public opinion of those with ASD. She broke the barrier of the negative perceptions of ASD by becoming very successful in an animal welfare career using a unique way of thinking that was a result of her autism.<sup>2</sup> In the short term, she opened a new, first-hand point of view on autism that had never been accessed before and showed what positive contributions people with ASD can make. In the long term, Grandin continues the fight to make people with ASD accepted and better understood throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

## **Historical Context**

Autism was first publicly recognized by the Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger. He worked in Vienna during World War II, researching and testing children with disabilities. Asperger highlighted the skills of some children with autism, and those high-functioning children with autism were later identified as having "Asperger syndrome." Controversially, the pediatrician actively collaborated in the Nazi euthanasia program, which mass murdered thousands of disabled children deemed genetically unfit.<sup>4</sup> Once the Axis lost the war and Hitler's homicides had been

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<sup>1</sup> "About Temple Grandin." *Temple Grandin, Ph.D.*, 2012, <https://www.templegrandin.com/>

<sup>2</sup>Ryan Bell. "Temple Grandin, Killing THEM Softly at Slaughterhouses for 30 Years." *National Geographic*, 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/food/the-plate/2015/08/19/temple-grandin-killing-them-softly-at-slaughterhouses-for-30-years/>

<sup>3</sup>“Temple Grandin: Seeing the world from a different perspective”. *Global Animal Partnership*, 2016, *Global Animal Partnership*, <https://globalanimalpartnership.org/about/news/post/temple-grandin/>

<sup>4</sup>Klin, Ami, and Joseph D. Buxbaum. “Did Hans Asperger Actively Assist the Nazi Euthanasia Program?” *Molecular Autism*, BioMed Central, 19 Apr. 2018, [molecularautism.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13229-018-0209-5](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-018-0209-5).

revealed, the research on people with ASD began to gain traction in the United States. Studies started to be done by scientists such as Leo Kanner in the early to mid twentieth century. Kanner conducted multiple studies on children with autism. He found that the children shared some characteristics, but no two cases were alike.<sup>5</sup> The limited research that was done by pediatric centers across the U.S. caused autism to be viewed as a mental illness. The complete lack of understanding of the condition made neurotypical Americans believe that people with ASD were unfit for society. This public segregation made state governments inclined to open institutions to house people with autism and mental illness. In time, these public asylums became hospitals for people with autism or mental illness who could not afford to be “treated” at private institutions which gave more attention to patients. Conditions at public asylums were terrible, and the government failed to keep them funded, so Congress closed them in 1994.<sup>6</sup>

Treatments at both public and private institutions were very torturous. The main techniques in the earlier days of asylums included electrical testing (shocks), hydrotherapy (water pressure), and rest (positioning the body in certain ways). Treatment was mainly focused on the body because it was believed that autism was caused by a defect in the nervous system. As their limited understanding increased a small amount, scientists started to believe that autism originated in the brain. After this realization, another treatment was added to asylums: hypnosis was used with the goal of finding past memories in the brain to see what caused the patient to acquire ASD. Children who were institutionalized by their families could be kept at the asylums for a very long time, sometimes losing connection with their families. If families did not want to institutionalize, their only choice was to raise them at home or mainstream them into public

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<sup>5</sup>Kanner, Leo. "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact." *Pathology*, 1948, pp. 217–220.

<sup>6</sup>Holtzman, Ellen. "A Home Away from Home." *Monitor on Psychology*, American Psychological Association, 2012, [www.apa.org/monitor/2012/03/asylums](http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/03/asylums).

schools. The public school system did not have any options for children needing special education. Education for people with different mental abilities was not seen as an aspect that needed to be added to the public school system. This was caused by the growth of alienation that allowed neurodiverse to be segregated from neurotypicals. Across the world, neurodiverse people were being excluded everywhere in society, from workplaces, schools, and other institutions.

### **Breaking the Barrier**

During this difficult time for people with disabilities, Temple Grandin emerged, breaking the barrier of the negative perception of autism that was present in the mid-20th century. Born in 1947, Grandin exhibited sensory challenges early on. After she was tested in 1950, Grandin's parents were told she should immediately be institutionalized.<sup>7</sup> Her parents, fearing the loss of their young child, decided to raise her at home. Her difficulties were immediately recognizable. She had speech issues and did not talk until she was three and a half years old. Her senses were very vulnerable and she was easily affected by loud noises or strong scents. Even with all of these challenges, her parents decided to mainstream her into a public school. This was a step toward a new approach to education for children with special needs. Her parents became revolutionaries by making the decision to send their neurodiverse child to school to receive an education to try and become an active member of American society. Her years of school were rocky as she was very disconnected from people. Grandin preferred her own company where she did not have to worry about being teased or bullied. Her classmates considered her "weird" and

she had a hard time making friends. She only had friends in the hobbies she did, which included her passion for riding horses.<sup>8</sup> In school, she was able to

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<sup>7</sup>“5 Questions: Temple Grandin discusses autism, animal communication.” *Stanford Medicine*, Stanford University, 2019, <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2014/11/5-questions--temple-grandin-discusses-autism--animal-communicati.html>

<sup>8</sup>“About Temple Grandin.” *Temple Grandin, Ph.D.*, 2012, <https://www.templegrandin.com/>

understand most of the content that was placed in front of her, especially science. The subject tied in with her unique way of thinking, which she didn’t discover was special until later in life. Grandin’s brain turned the words she saw into images.<sup>9</sup> This way of thinking was useful for some aspects of school, like science, but challenging in others, such as math. She had yet to find a way to utilize the ability, but it would launch her career only a few years later.

Grandin’s mixed success in school was enough for her to push through to college. This was ground shaking in the ASD community. She was one of the first people with autism to attend college. Without realizing it, Temple Grandin had done more revolutionary work in under two decades than most people will do in an entire lifetime. Temple’s early college years at Franklin Pierce University went much like school in her earlier years. She was able to understand the required class material but excelled in science, where her interest was peaking. College was one of the places where Grandin worked on her social skills. Away from her parents, she became more accustomed to talking with and being around neurotypical people. Her bachelor’s degree came in human psychology, so her learning took place inside and outside of the classroom.<sup>10</sup> Her studies in psychology helped her understand how her brain differed from those around her. This was where Grandin truly learned of her unique abilities as a thinker.

After gaining a college degree and more experience with society, Grandin decided it was time to pursue an earlier passion, and sought a master’s degree in animal science from Arizona

State University, then a PhD from the University of Illinois. Temple Grandin's interest started long

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<sup>9</sup>“Harvard EdCast: 10 Minutes with Temple Grandin.” *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, HGSE Publishing Policies and Disclaimers, 2019, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/14/04/harvard-edcast-10-minutes-temple-grandin>

<sup>10</sup>“Temple Grandin.” *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, May 2019, p. 1. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=kh&AN=134517079&site=ehost-live.

<sup>11</sup>“Temple Grandin: Seeing the world from a different perspective”. *Global Animal Partnership*, 2016, *Global Animal Partnership*, <https://globalanimalpartnership.org/about/news/post/temple-grandin/>

before, at her aunt's cattle ranch in Arizona. She found a connection with the large meat-producing animals at a young age.<sup>11</sup> She enjoyed the time she spent there and was comfortable around cattle, more so than around people. While getting her degree in animal science, Grandin was able to learn more about her special connection to animals. She earned a master's in 1975 and launched herself into a career in animal welfare. Grandin started off with one belief: treat the animal as well as you can.<sup>12</sup> This may be thought of as simple, but for the ruthless livestock industry, this was new thinking. Before Grandin's entrance into the meat packing business, efficiency and cleanliness were below par. Animals were nervous and fidgety because of the harsh scenes that were visible in their pens and place of execution. The process lacked consistency. Instances of cattle not being killed in one attempt led to chaos multiple times a day. When she entered into the industry, she immediately saw what needed to change. For someone new into a job, to challenge many of the top dogs was unthinkable, and yet she did just that. In many cases, she had to confront plant owners to get an idea through, and many of them did not want to see change.<sup>13</sup> Temple didn't understand this. Why couldn't they see that treating the animals well was just as important as making money? While studying animal science, she learned that animal thinking was sensory, and used pictures as a way of thinking. Temple found that this way of thinking was very like her own, giving her a unique connection to the animals through her autism. “Autism

helped me understand animals because I think in pictures. Since animals do not have language, their memories have to be

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<sup>12</sup>Ford, Jacquelin. "What You Need to Know about Temple Grandin and Cows." *Biodiversity Heritage Library - Program News and Collection Highlights from BHL*, Biodiversity Heritage Library, 2012, [blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2012/08/templecows.html](http://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2012/08/templecows.html).

<sup>13</sup>Ryan Bell. "Temple Grandin, Killing THem Softly at Slaughterhouses for 30 Years." *National Geographic*, 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/food/the-plate/2015/08/19/temple-grandin-killing-them-softly-at-slaughterhouses-for-30-years/>

<sup>14</sup>"5 Questions: Temple Grandin discusses autism, animal communication." *Stanford Medicine*, Stanford University, 2019, <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2014/11/5-questions--temple-grandin-discusses-autism--animal-communication.html>

<sup>15</sup>Ford, Jacquelin. "What You Need to Know about Temple Grandin and Cows." *Biodiversity Heritage Library - Program News and Collection Highlights from BHL*, Biodiversity Heritage Library, 2012, [blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2012/08/templecows.html](http://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2012/08/templecows.html).

<sup>16</sup>Ryan Bell. "Temple Grandin, Killing THem Softly at Slaughterhouses for 30 Years." *National Geographic*, 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/food/the-plate/2015/08/19/temple-grandin-killing-them-softly-at-slaughterhouses-for-30-years/>

sensory-based instead of word-based."<sup>14</sup> She was able to know what machinery would scare them,

and which types would soothe them. She knew how to keep the cattle calm during the slaughter process. This advantage propelled her forward in the meat industry.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, two of her designs transformed the process. The first was the curved loading chutes, which was an ingenious idea to fix a major problem.<sup>16</sup> When the cattle were being loaded to walk forward and be slaughtered, they could easily see what was about to happen to them. Cattle would stop, try to back up, and balk, causing congestion in the loading process and reducing efficiency. Temple's idea was to curve the loading tracks, so the cattle would not be able to see what was about to happen. The curve in the loading track also made cattle feel like they were returning to the herd, adding a mood of comfort and safety.<sup>17</sup> Many plants in America made the easy switch to the curved loading chutes, which decreased stress in the slaughtering process.<sup>18</sup> Her second major design was the center track retaining system. This was a conveyor belt piece of equipment which propelled the cows forward by straddling them between all four legs. This gave workers more than enough time to stun the cows before they were slaughtered, creating a safer process.<sup>19</sup>

After Grandin's renowned success as a designer, private companies, such as McDonald's, sought her expertise. The large fast food company was suing a British group for publishing a pamphlet that accused the company of inhumane treatment of animals. The lawsuit dragged on for seven years and cost the company \$16 million. They finally brought in Temple Grandin to clean

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<sup>15</sup> Ford, Jacquelin. "What You Need to Know about Temple Grandin and Cows." *Biodiversity Heritage Library - Program News and Collection Highlights from BHL*, Biodiversity Heritage Library, 2012, [blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2012/08/templecows.html](http://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2012/08/templecows.html).

<sup>16</sup>Ryan Bell. "Temple Grandin, Killing Them Softly at Slaughterhouses for 30 Years." *National Geographic*, 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/food/the-plate/2015/08/19/temple-grandin-killing-them-softly-at-slaughterhouses-for-30-years/>

<sup>17</sup>"Temple Grandin: Seeing the world from a different perspective". *Global Animal Partnership*, 2016, *Global Animal Partnership*, <https://globalanimalpartnership.org/about/news/post/temple-grandin/>

<sup>18,19</sup>Ryan Bell. "Temple Grandin, Killing Them Softly at Slaughterhouses for 30 Years." *National Geographic*, 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/food/the-plate/2015/08/19/temple-grandin-killing-them-softly-at-slaughterhouses-for-30-years/>

things up. She completely renovated their facilities, installed non-slip flooring, changed the lighting, taught the workers not to leave objects around that would scare the cattle, and added more improvements. McDonald's hired Temple for another three years to help in other facilities. She traveled around their plants, taking data and helping to clean things up. She said "things are not perfect, but I can tell you, compared to the bad old days, there's been light-years of improvement."<sup>20</sup>

### **Short-term Impacts**

Once Grandin reached renown in the cattle industry she decided to use her voice in the advocacy of autism. Grandin's speaking had an immediate impact on the ASD community. She started writing about how she used her gift to perform as a successful adult with autism. A couple of her books are *Thinking in Pictures* and *The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum*. Her books took off, and she instantly became an icon for autism equality in a time when very little was understood about ASD. She started giving talks, mainly on how to achieve

as a person with autism and how to help a person with autism achieve.<sup>21</sup> She advised people with ASD to embrace it. Her public speeches were able to help many throughout the chaotic process of diagnosis, early intervention, and education for those with special needs. She highlights that there is no one type of autism, but she has done her best to give aid to every single person with ASD.<sup>22</sup>

### **Long-term impacts**

Grandin's amazing success at reforming a very non-progressive industry helped to break down the

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<sup>20</sup>Ryan Bell. "Temple Grandin, Killing Them Softly at Slaughterhouses for 30 Years." *National Geographic*, 2015,

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/food/the-plate/2015/08/19/temple-grandin-killing-them-softly-at-slaughterhouses-for-30-years/>

<sup>21</sup>"Temple Grandin." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, May 2019, p. 1. *EBSCOhost*,

<search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=khh&AN=134517079&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>22</sup>"About Temple Grandin." *Temple Grandin, Ph.D.*, 2012, <https://www.templegrandin.com/>

barrier of the perception of autism from a firsthand point of view. Its image changed from incompetence, to genius. It was viewed not as a disability, but an ability. It became not something that you had to work through, but something you could work with. This change didn't happen overnight, but her voice was the driving force in breaking the barrier. She also notes that as an inspiration, it is important to have a "real job" so that children will know that work is important. Her work in the cattle industry produced many internationally-used designs, not to mention the community that she created.<sup>23</sup> Treating the cows as humanely as possible is now the most important principle in the meat industry. The culture she brought to the cattle business is not the only policy change that came with her work. Many education policies in the last twenty-five years have been created or revised as a result of the advocacy she does for ASD equality. An example of this is the IDEA, or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Many

recent revisions have been made to be able to help younger children with autism receive all the support they can and help them to achieve in school.<sup>24</sup> Much of what Temple Grandin campaigns about is related to this, giving her a notable portion of credit in these revisions. Another example of her influence is the recent change to the category of autism, which has been greatly broadened.<sup>25</sup> This broadened definition has placed many great scientists, artists, and engineers in the category of having ASD, providing a further awareness of ASD as an ability rather than a disability.

## **Conclusion**

Temple Grandin's autism advocacy highlighted the importance of having an equal place for people with special needs in society. Her advocacy was fueled by the image she became for the

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<sup>23</sup>“Harvard EdCast: 10 Minutes with Temple Grandin.” *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, HGSE Publishing Policies and Disclaimers, 2019, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/14/04/harvard-edcast-10-minutes-temple-grandin>

<sup>24</sup>“About IDEA.” *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/#IDEA-Purpose.

<sup>25</sup>“About Temple Grandin.” *Temple Grandin, Ph.D.*, 2012, <https://www.templegrandin.com/>

ASD community while her fame within her job grew. She credits her success in the cattle community to her connection with cows that she developed at a young age.<sup>26</sup> This connection is a product of Grandin's autism which gave her the ability to think in images, a skill closely associated with animal's sensory thinking.<sup>27</sup> Temple Grandin's first hand point of view on ASD made her an icon for advice within the special needs community.<sup>28</sup> Her impact upon the autism community has been felt by everyone associated with it, for she tore down the negative perceptions of autism that once plagued society and led to social alienation.

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<sup>2644</sup>Temple Grandin: Seeing the world from a different perspective". *Global Animal Partnership*, 2016, *Global Animal Partnership*, <https://globalanimalpartnership.org/about/news/post/temple-grandin/>

<sup>2745</sup>5 Questions: Temple Grandin discusses autism, animal communication." *Stanford Medicine*, Stanford University, 2019, <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2014/11/5-questions--temple-grandin-discusses-autism--animal-communication.html>

<sup>28</sup>Sacks, Oliver. "Foreword." *Thinking In Pictures*, Vintage, 1995, pp. 11-13

<sup>2644</sup>Temple Grandin: Seeing the world from a different perspective". *Global Animal Partnership*, 2016, *Global Animal Partnership*, <https://globalanimalpartnership.org/about/news/post/temple-grandin/>

## Annotated Bibliography

"5 Questions: Temple Grandin discusses autism, animal communication." *Stanford*

*Medicine*, Stanford University, 2019,

<https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2014/11/5-questions--temple-grandin-discusses-autism--animal-communication.html>

This source gave me information about Grandin's connection to animals, specifically in her work and during her childhood. Stanford Medicine's discussion with Grandin also contained

information on her belief in how others with autism could find the same communication to animals.

“About IDEA.” *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*,

[sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/#IDEA-Purpose](https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/#IDEA-Purpose).

This source gave me general information for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Temple Grandin’s advocate work promotes much of what is in the IDEA, especially in the newly made revisions to the law promoting equality in education by giving all students the help that they require.

“About Temple Grandin.” *Temple Grandin, Ph.D.*, 2012, <https://www.templegrandin.com/>.

This source gave me general information about Temple Grandin’s development, education, and work in cattle and autism advocacy and beliefs. “About Temple Grandin ” also had information about new autism statistics, along with education advice from her.

“Autism Research at Yale.” *Yale School of Medicine*, 2019,

<https://medicine.yale.edu/obgyn/kliman/auti>

[sm/research/](https://medicine.yale.edu/obgyn/kliman/autism/research/)

This source had information about what is believed to cause autism and about diagnosis and early intervention in therapies. “Autism Research at Yale” also contained medical statistics from recent studies done.

Ford, Jacquelin. “What You Need to Know about Temple Grandin and Cows.” *Biodiversity Heritage Library - Program News and Collection Highlights from BHL*, Biodiversity Heritage Library, 2012, [blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2012/08/templecows.html](http://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2012/08/templecows.html).

This source had information on Temple Grandin’s very unique relationship with cattle and her beliefs in what needs to happen in the meatpacking industry for it to have a better representation. She also talks about the previous negative relationship between man and animal and her work in changing that relationship.

“Harvard EdCast: 10 Minutes with Temple Grandin.” *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, HGSE Publishing Policies and Disclaimers, 2019, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/14/04/harvard-edcast-10-minutes-temple-grandin>.

This source gave me information about what Temple Grandin’s advice is to helping younger children with autism. “Harvard EdCast” also had information about her belief in no one type of ASD.

Kanner, Leo. “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact.” *Pathology*, 1948, pp. 217–220.

This source was a study on children with autism which was not understood at all in that time period. “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact” contained the characteristics, physical and actions, of a small child with autism as well as differing from “normal” children.

Klin, Ami, and Joseph D. Buxbaum. “Did Hans Asperger Actively Assist the Nazi Euthanasia Program?” *Molecular Autism*, BioMed Central, 19 Apr. 2018, [molecularautism.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13229-018-0209-5](http://molecularautism.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13229-018-0209-5).

This source gave information on one of the first scientists to identify autism, Hans Asperger. The physicist identified autism, but also worked for the Nazi euthanasia program which attempted to purify the race by killing all people who were not “pure” in their race, beliefs, or abilities.

McGowan, Kat. “Exploring Temple Grandin’s Brain.” *Discover*, vol. 34, no. 3, Apr. 2013, pp. 14–15. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=85898251&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=85898251&site=ehost-live).

This source gave me information on Temple Grandin’s unique way of thinking in pictures and how she applies that to her work in the cattle industry. “Exploring Temple Grandin’s Brain” also had elements of studies of her brain, specifically the anatomy of it.

Ryan Bell. "Temple Grandin, Killing Them Softly at Slaughterhouses for 30 Years."

*National Geographic*, 2015,

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/food/the-plate/2015/08/19/temple-grandin-killing-them-softly-at-slaughterhouses-for-30-years/>

This source gave me information on how Temple Grandin has improved, and still is trying to improve, slaughterhouses for cattle. The source also discusses her connection to cattle and how her autism has created this connection. National Geographic's article also contained information on her work for McDonald's.

Sachdev, Ailsa. "Trendsetter." *Sierra*, vol. 98, no. 6, Nov. 2013, p. 9. *EBSCOhost*,

[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=91282062&site=ehost-live](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=91282062&site=ehost-live).

This source gave me information on Temple Grandin's work in the cattle industry, and specifically the different types of cattle farms and meat producing plantations she has worked with. She also adds info about her reconciling of eating meat and her visual thinking relating to autism.

Sacks, Oliver. "Foreword." *Thinking In Pictures*, Vintage, 1995, pp. 11-13

This source gave me information on how Temple Grandin is the main spokesperson for the entire autistic world from her firsthand point of view. The foreword also contains information of her difficulties as a child, historical context on how autism was not recognized, and her deciphering of neurotypical people.

“Temple Grandin.” *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, May 2019, p. 1.

*EBSCOhost*,

[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=khh&AN=134517079&site=ehost](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=khh&AN=134517079&site=ehost)

-live.

This source gave me general information on Temple Grandin’s work in cattle and as an autism spokesperson, as well as her education and her influence on the next generation of people entering her industry.