

Puppets and Autism: A Special Connection
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Questions & Answers with Kieran Braun

What drew you to puppetry?

Sitting in my grandfather's lap we would watch *Sesame Street* for hours. I also enjoyed *Gerbert*, *Captain Kangaroo's Mr. Moose*, and *Lamb Chop's Play Along*. Additionally, I watched puppet characters in amateur puppet productions from the Christian children's video series, *Cedarmont Kids*.

In Jim Henson productions, the puppets could take on any form or shape. You don't literally have to follow the rules. One of my favorite skits was *Eight Balls of Fur*. As a very young child, I knew every move that the fur balls made and could perform their routine step-for-step. I also loved *Wet Paint*, among other rock songs written by Chris Cerf.

I didn't originally know how they accomplished some of the techniques, but have learned over time that with advanced technology, puppets can ride bicycles, swim, and even eat.

When I was in the third grade, I came across what happened to be my favorite Jim Henson production, *Fraggle Rock*. It all started after watching my first *Fraggle Rock* video, *A Festive Fraggle Holiday*, which featured the Christmas episodes, *The Bells of Fraggle Rock* and *The Perfect Blue Rollie*. Although I was intrigued by those two episodes, I was still into watching the *Sesame Street* rock songs and Disney's *Little Mermaid*. As I watched those shows, I wondered if there was a Muppet production that had similar themes and vibes. I finally found my answer when I saw more *Fraggle Rock* episodes in the video, *Where It All Began*. As I became interested in *Fraggle Rock*, I had a dream one night that I visited the glamorous caves of *Fraggle Rock* and hung out with the Fraggle Five. When I told my teacher, she was so impressed that she gave me some *Fraggle Rock* plush dolls and VHS tapes that had been her son's. It was one of my favorite grade school experiences, and I have been collecting *Fraggle Rock* items ever since.

How did puppetry support your social and language development?

Even from my toddler years, puppets were a tremendous part of my motivation. My mom and I would put on our bathing suits, get into the bathtub, and play with water puppets for hours. Relaxing and having fun with puppets made language acquisition a bit easier.

I loved *Sesame Street* as a toddler. Some of my first words were spoken after seeing *Sesame Street* videos. In fact, my first word was "Elmo." Over the years, I enjoyed puppets in

role plays with my parents, speech therapists, and counselors. I began to use puppets to talk even when I was unsure of how to converse in “typical reciprocal communication.”

How has puppetry complemented your education?

I was diagnosed with autism at age three and puppets were part of my everyday life and my intensive intervention. As a young child, I was obsessed with *Sesame Street* and through it I learned how puppetry can be used as an effective tool to communicate with an audience. I also figured out that puppetry could be used as a method to communicate with people in my day-to-day life. All through school and even into my college experience, I participated in puppet productions. My experience evolved from playing with puppets to writing original plays and directing my own puppet productions. Not only did these experiences bring me great joy creatively, but they also led to the development of meaningful relationships and friendships.

Puppetry as an academic reward

Often, we had a system of rewards for me to understand appropriate communication and behavior. Almost always, when I completed a task or succeeded in gaining a skill, my reward would be puppetry related. I would get a new puppet book, puppet video, or we would make plans to take a trip to the Center for Puppetry Arts for their fabulous productions. A few times, my reward was to go to Disney World, where my favorite productions like *Voyage of the Little Mermaid* or *Playhouse Disney Live on Stage* would bring me so much joy. I also loved *Muppet Vision 3D* and immersed myself in the puppet characters.

Using puppetry as a calming strategy

When I was young, I found my love for puppets served to both entertain and calm me. I loved watching characters and imitating voices. I have an eidetic memory, so I would also memorize the credits from puppet productions and the research the puppeteers, builders, and directors and predict what their next project would be. As an adult, when I got into puppet building, I found that creating unique puppets calms my nerves. I love working in a quiet setting and creating new characters.

Speech development supported by puppetry

I spent quite a bit of time in speech therapy. One of my favorite speech therapists was a good friend of my mother, and her therapy puppet had a moving tongue mechanism that helped me to understand how the mouth works to formulate speech. My therapist would also allow me to role play dialogue and conversation using puppet characters. We did a lot of hard work to help me with pragmatic language, and puppets made it much more enjoyable for me.

Social skills development through puppetry

I could go on and on regarding how puppets have been used through the years to develop my social skills. My first elementary school social skills counselor had puppets of Lamb Chop, Charlie Horse, and Hush Puppy, and my favorite puppet, Harry, who she cut from an old rug. We did a lot of role-playing and experimentation with making up stories and interacting with one another.

My next social skills counselor used a fun bee puppet with the students to teach the “Bee” concepts, “Bee kind,” “Bee thoughtful,” and “Bee a friend.” I loved learning important moral lessons as I followed her bee puppet.

My middle school social skills group counselor understood my passion for puppetry and allowed me to research puppet techniques and share them with my friends when we met for social skills group.

My gifted teacher was very aware of my deep love of puppets and used making puppets or performing with puppets in nearly all my exercises. She even helped me to develop a puppet production that I revised and performed all the way through college.

What was your first puppet production?

Fifteen years ago, I developed my first original puppet production, *In Search of Jim Henson*, at Jefferson Middle School as a sixth grader. As a child, I was inspired by documentaries, including *In Search of Dr. Seuss*, *Down at Fraggle Rock: Behind the Scenes*, and *The World of the Dark Crystal*. Since Jim Henson and Dr. Seuss were two of my favorite heroes, I hit on the idea of writing a humorous, biographical presentation in which my puppet characters could teach audiences about Jim Henson and his fabulous Muppets. When I proposed my idea to my gifted instructor, she collaborated with my advanced English teacher who was fascinated by my passion for puppetry. My teacher allowed me to instruct my fellow classmates in the art of puppetry to help me bring this production to fruition. We worked on this production at the end of the school day for an extended period, and everyone was thrilled when we presented it to hundreds of students and faculty. We received wonderful feedback, and I was asked to repeat the performance numerous times. Some of my friends who were in this class still talk with me about this after all this time has passed. We made *In Search of Jim Henson* as entertaining as possible and something of which I am proud. All the middle school students had a very positive response. Months after the performance, I had the opportunity to give a recorded copy to Jim Henson’s son, Brian, at his Center for Puppetry Arts conference, *The Future of Digital Puppetry*.

In retrospect, *In Search of Jim Henson* was the kickoff production of my puppetry career. I learned how to further improve my puppet manipulation skills in subsequent performances after studying the One Way Street instructional DVD, *Puppet Ministry: Basics and Beyond*, as well as attending puppet festivals and workshops.

Could you tell me about your original production, *Protect and Preserve*?

Protect and Preserve is an educational production that teaches children about wildlife and conservation in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. I developed this project as part of my high school service-learning class. It was the first time I directed an entire puppet production and assembled a team of puppeteers. They were some of my closest friends, and we all did our part to make this show as entertaining as possible.

We performed *Protect and Preserve* for three years at local elementary schools and even performed at the Knoxville Zoo. The success of my performance led to my attendance at the Evergreen Ball in Knoxville, where the *Friends of the Smokies* awarded my production and included it in the Parks as Classroom curriculum across the state of Tennessee. Three years later, during my senior year of college, as part of my Bonner Scholar senior capstone project, I revised the storyline of *Protect and Preserve* to add more excitement to my production and performed it at the Jefferson City Public Library with a puppet team comprised of friends and fellow artists who came together to help me with this revival. This capstone project was designed to promote puppetry and the arts to underprivileged children in our area. In addition to the performance, I taught the children in the audience how to construct their own Make-it Take-it puppets, which I created and prepared prior to these shows.

Could you tell me about your original productions, *Make a Plan* and *Different Does Not Mean Less*?

Two months after my puppet production, *Protect and Preserve*, I debuted *Make a Plan*, a bullying-awareness program that was divided into two segments. The first segment, *Make a Plan*, tells the story of how a little girl, Rosie, overcomes her anxiety and learns valuable methods of addressing a bully. The second segment, *Different Does Not Mean Less*, is about embracing diversity. It features a group of students with various strengths and challenges. The program recognizes and celebrates the inherent value and potential of all unique individuals. I originally performed this production with my high school service-learning team at local elementary schools, and then performed at the Jefferson City Public Library during my senior year of college. We were inexperienced at first, but the show and our skills evolved. The production was very well-received, and years later, people still ask me about it.

In 2019, the artistic director of the A.D. Players Theatre in Houston asked me to present a stage presentation and conduct a workshop to promote the art of puppetry. I decided that *Make a Plan* would be the perfect choice for my presentation and was able to collaborate with the A.D. players' actors. Through video conferencing and emails, we were able to make this project come to fruition. In addition to the play, I also presented a workshop, *Beyond the Naked Hand*. In this workshop, I provided a course in the art of puppetry and taught students some basic puppet manipulation techniques. My workshop, *Beyond the Naked Hand*, and my revival of *Make a Plan* was my first professional puppetry experience. I was able to partner with many

talented artists and actors who worked for the A.D. Players and perform in the beautiful George Theater. The staff and I all worked together to make this experience a wonderful success.

Puppetry as a vocational/career goal

From a very young age, I decided that I wanted puppetry to be my profession. My music teacher introduced me to *Carnival of the Animals*, *The Nutcracker*, *The Adventures of Peer Gynt*, and *Peter and the Wolf*. I loved the accompanying puppet productions and wanted to meet master puppeteer Jim Gamble for years before finally having the opportunity in 2009. I spent the day with Jim when I was fourteen, and he showed me all around his workshop. He explained that it can be difficult to support yourself as a puppeteer and suggested I plan to have a secondary job in mind to pay for the bills until I could become an established artist. In Jim's case, he worked for U.S. Air Force and was a pilot for Continental Airlines before finally getting the opportunity to be a full-time puppeteer. He understood the need to have business experience under your belt before embarking on a career in puppetry.

I decided early on that I would try and attend University of Connecticut to obtain a degree in Puppetry Arts. When it came time to apply for college, the tuition costs and tremendous distance from my home in Tennessee made this dream seem unattainable. When talking with Aretta Baumgartner, the educational director for the Center for Puppetry Arts, she suggested I might look at attending a smaller liberal arts college with a theatre/graphic design major where I could participate in puppetry related opportunities. By attending a smaller liberal arts university, I was able to be involved in building puppets, sets, lighting, character development and all aspects of production. I made close friends and had a fabulous mentor theatre director who understood my passion for puppetry and gave me as many opportunities as possible to experience projects where puppetry was involved.

Do you find the puppetry community to be inclusive?

Yes. I felt that the puppetry community is very inclusive. People of different ethnicities, as well as gender and ability, are included in the community. Topics in puppetry sometimes address difficult issues in a sensitive way. The puppetry community is a diverse group. I met with a plethora of tremendously diverse individuals throughout my puppetry journey. They care about how I feel and celebrate my passion for puppetry.

What has been your experience as an individual with autism as you navigated your way through the puppetry community?

My experience has been quite fun and entertaining as well as educational. My parents worked diligently to afford me the opportunities to network with people in the autism community. I had a passion and desire to make these connections but often did not know how to navigate building relationships. As I began to attend productions and meet people in the

community, I learned that once you see a performance, you can research about the puppeteers and the production and learn more about the production. It is fun to look through archives and cross-reference artists and puppet builders and directors and see how their work has evolved and changed. I love meeting the people in the puppetry community at different events and performances and through online connections. Again, my parents had to help me set boundaries and reasonable expectations as I navigated developing personal and professional relationships. My passion for this art can be all encompassing, so sometimes it is difficult to be patient as I acquire knowledge and build connections. Puppet people are some of my favorite people. They are often intelligent, creative, and encouraging. I hope to one day be able to work full-time and support myself as a professional puppeteer and puppet builder.

What do you find interesting about autistic puppeteers in the puppetry community?

When I attended the 2017 National Puppetry Festival in Minnesota, I learned that I was not the only autistic puppeteer in the states. At the festival, I met a few attendees who were close to my age and were also on the autism spectrum. They, too, are embarking on puppetry-related careers. Like so many, including myself, these new acquaintances are fans of Jim Henson and have dreams of becoming professional puppeteers.

One day, while I was looking for interesting puppetry television shows, I came across *Jellybean Jungle*. I immediately enjoyed the work of creator and head puppeteer Paul Louis, who was also diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Through his Facebook page, I learned that he was creating a *Jellybean Jungle* episode called *Duddlington the Different*, based on his own experiences as he dealt with the challenges of Asperger's. I mention this because I was intrigued by the fact that before I was born, there was already an autistic puppeteer in the puppetry community.

What are the obstacles you find in navigating through your goal as a professional puppeteer, as it relates to your diagnosis?

There are very few puppetry-related jobs in my, or probably any, community for that matter, so it is hard to be patient and still follow my dream. When you aren't in direct contact with other puppeteers, it can take longer to develop relationships through online communication. I have always dreamed of being a professional puppeteer and puppet builder. I do not want to give up on this dream because of demographics. It is difficult to connect with people who might have opportunities or connections when I don't have the opportunity to interact with many people in this industry who are located near me.

Does puppetry continue to bring you joy all these years later?

Yes. Puppetry continues to excite and inspire me. I enjoy creating puppets and puppet productions, as well as viewing and studying those developed by other performers and artists.

Puppetry has helped me to break down barriers of communication throughout my life, and I hope to continue communicating to others through puppetry. It also acts as a stress reliever and makes me feel included. I enjoy talking with fellow puppeteers about their careers and sharing their reflections. It brings me great joy to share what I have learned through my interactions with other artists.