

Embracing My Differences and Finding Purpose

By

Auston Stamm

(1,500 Words)

***Rough Draft Due by August**

Ever since I was put into a classroom I always wanted to blend in and be inconspicuous. I had a fear of standing out and being deemed different. My Mom would always repeat the Dr. Seuss quote to me, "Why fit in when you were born to stand out?" Having an invisible disability helped me overcome my fear of standing out and speaking up.

An early example of this pattern occurred when I was in 4th grade at a public school. I have mild cerebral palsy, which makes handwriting very difficult. The teacher assumed since I looked like the other students, I should be able to take notes like them, too. The teacher came to my desk when I was struggling to write legible notes before recess. She looked at me sternly and said, "Your notes are sloppy, and you need to pay more attention. No one can leave until Auston finishes taking notes from the board." Suddenly, I was humiliated, and my classmates began bullying me for their lost recess time. My teacher labeled me an apathetic "C" student with limited potential. My Mom was my biggest advocate and always in my corner. I remember her encouraging my teachers to allow me to rap my book reports when I was in elementary school. I had a stutter and the rhyming helped me maintain fluent speech. However, there was a lot of resistance to modifying assignments. I would have circled the drain in the education system if it wasn't for Westmark School.

My parents and grandparents worked to help me transition to a non-public school called Westmark School in the 5th grade. The school embraced modifying assignments to capitalize on each student's strengths. I was provided an Alphasmart, which is basically a keyboard with a word processing program. I went from being the slowest notetaker to being one of the fastest. In addition, I was taught how to use Final Cut Pro in middle school and encouraged to make movies instead of hand-drawn posterboard projects. I became well known to my peers as a filmmaker because of the videos I created. This led to me attending Loyola Marymount and graduating with a BA in film production.

After college, I tried working at a post-production company. I found it difficult to keep track of the actors due to my prosopagnosia or face blindness. I also didn't find tricking people into seeing bad movies meaningful. I began exploring a career change and started shadowing one of my old occupational therapists to learn more about the job. My Mom helped me advocate for the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) to provide funding for my Master's degree. After a lot of meetings, negotiation, and career testing, I was able to receive funding to get my Master's in occupational therapy at USC.

Throughout my time at USC, I began to wonder how my strengths and passion would connect with the field. I am not very observant and relied on the GPS to get to school each day. It was difficult for me to see myself navigating a hospital setting, with lots of nondescript hallways.

Eventually, I had a session that covered assistive technology, and I was captivated. I was able to secure an internship at Santa Monica College, where I worked in their High Tech Center for students with disabilities. After graduation, I immediately began searching for assistive technology jobs in higher education. I was able to find an opening at Saint Mary's College. During the interview, I disclosed that I had a learning disability and explained how that would help me connect better with the students. The panel seemed supportive, and I was not asked to elaborate further.

When I started at Saint Mary's, I told my supervisor about how the DOR provided me with a standing desk for my job. I explained how standing helps me focus by allowing me to move throughout the day; when I sit, I am much more likely to slouch and get fatigued. My supervisor supported the idea, and I used my standing desk throughout my time at Saint Mary's.

I always knew that I had ADHD, but I felt ashamed to admit it. It was a silent challenge that I needed to overcome to complete homework assignments. However, in my new role at Saint Mary's, I began to see my ADHD as a superpower. My ADHD promotes doing tasks simultaneously, which made me very productive. I was able to hyperfocus on producing accessible books, captioning, and tutorial videos on different assistive technologies. My boss was very impressed with all the different tasks I was able to accomplish each day. Eventually, I felt comfortable revealing my ADHD diagnosis over lunch with my boss and colleagues.

I've had to explain to my students and some staff that I have prosopagnosia or face blindness to help with embarrassing situations. For example, students have come into my office without checking in with the front desk first. The student believes that I should recognize them right away because we met last week. However, I do not recognize them. I've had similar situations with staff who would run into me on campus. I find being upfront about my disability helps them understand why I don't know who they are right away.

I became the faculty advisor for the DiverseAbilities Club on campus. I helped create a lot of social events during the pandemic by leveraging online party games like Jackbox. I found creating an agenda and using starter questions helped students feel comfortable. In addition, I arranged events where students, speakers and I would share tips for talking with professors about accommodations. Students learned that they might feel more comfortable interacting with their professors if they could frame the conversation in a positive way and set good boundaries.

Over time I began to feel more comfortable sharing my experiences with cerebral palsy, prosopagnosia, ADHD, and my use of accommodations. During presentations and meetings, I would share my experiences, and they would resonate with many students, staff, and faculty. I encountered a minority of faculty who would prejudge the abilities of certain students with disabilities. I would explain the ADA and Section 504 to those faculty members and share my own experiences as a student with a disability. A lot of times I was able to cut through their bias and find a modification that the professor could leverage to make their course more accessible.

One difficult aspect of my job is that I have encountered a few faculty members who will share with me their biases regarding students with disabilities. I've had a faculty member tell me that

they don't want a certain student with a disability in their class. The faculty member had a preconceived idea of the student's limitations and was concerned that they would not be successful. When this kind of issue arises, it makes me very uncomfortable. However, I can educate the faculty member about the laws protecting students with disabilities, the resources the college provides, and my own experiences as a student with a disability. I have found that sharing my positive and successful experience as a student with disability helps to alleviate the professor's fears and makes them focus more on how to support the student. In this way staff and faculty members with disabilities can be an asset to higher education institutions because they can help spread understanding of disability by sharing their experiences.

The disability office at Saint Mary's supports students with disabilities by providing academic coaching, which I did as well. I enjoyed helping students organize their schedules and track their upcoming assignments. This interest led me to begin a doctorate program in educational technology as I felt that more students could benefit from educational technology support. That is how I became interested in mobile reminder notifications, a technology which supports universal design by reminding students when assignments are due.

I recently accepted a new position at Stanford University as their Digital Accessibility Instructional Specialist. At the start of each job interview I disclosed that I had mild cerebral palsy and used accommodations throughout my academic career. I even did this during the panel interview where there were a lot of people on the Zoom. My honesty was valued by my interviewers and demonstrated that I have a personal connection to instructional accessibility. I made the decision to disclose because trying to pass with an invisible disability creates too much pressure. I want my employer to know and accept my true self. However, I did not disclose all my disabilities because I felt that might be too overwhelming. I tried to find the right balance and knew that I could disclose more about my other disabilities if I was chosen for the position. Fortunately, I was offered the position, but I decided to take some time to negotiate the terms.

Stanford's Office of Digital Accessibility includes fully remote and hybrid workers. Throughout the hiring process I asked about remote work and reducing the number of required onsite days. I was able to negotiate the hybrid schedule down from two onsite days a week to three a month, which is written into my contract. The hybrid work schedule is very beneficial because it allows me to save energy that would normally be wasted commuting. I think remote work can benefit a lot of employees with disabilities by supporting energy conservation.

Overtime I bonded with my boss and coworkers and began to consider revealing my other disabilities. I happened to be having lunch with my boss and he revealed that his son has ADHD. I used that opening to reveal that I have ADHD and prosopagnosia. I shared how listening to soundscapes helps me focus while I work, and my boss was very supportive of the strategy. Soon afterward I learned about an upcoming ADHD Zoom event sponsored by Stanford's neurodiversity in IT initiative. I decided to participate and share my experience with all my IT colleagues. There were hundreds of Stanford IT employees on the Zoom, which was a little intimidating. Each presenter had a unique experience with ADHD and most of them were

diagnosed as adults. I shared my experiences with ADHD, cerebral palsy, and prosopagnosia. I highlighted how those disabilities impact my experiences at work. I used humor as I revealed my challenges, which helped me connect with the audience. For example, I joked about my prosopagnosia by promising to know each employee's name as long as our meeting took place on Zoom, where each participant's name is displayed. I received a lot of positive feedback after I shared my story and hopefully it will inspire other coworkers to disclose their disability too.

An important aspect of my work is reviewing the accessibility of Storyline content that is commonly used in trainings and continuing education content. I flag any digital accessibility errors like missing alternative text or interactive content that does not support keyboard input. An instructional designer reads the accessibility report and implements the changes. These improvements can help attract and keep employees with disabilities. For example, an employee with low vision may encounter a training module that is compatible with screen reading software or that can be magnified to 200% without pixelation. Providing accessible HR trainings and continuing education content can help employees with disabilities feel a sense of belonging.

I created an online Canvas course that focuses on teaching faculty and staff instructional accessibility principles. The course covers how to implement digital accessibility strategies like adding alternative text in Microsoft Word and Google Docs. I am also hosting training sessions with faculty and staff members to teach them how to integrate accessible strategies into their workflows. I have found participants to be very receptive when I suggest adding descriptive links or programmatic headings to an online course. These small changes can go a long way in making a course feel more inclusive. I feel this work connects with my purpose as I am helping to make courses accessible for people like me.