

Not Useless

As I prepare myself for the interview, I recall the few times I have interacted with my cousin Carlos. Carlos lives in New York, Queens with his mother and younger sibling. The three of them live in a bedroom. They share the kitchen and bathroom with other families that live in their own bedrooms. Living in such an environment, I wondered if such a small place with many people has ever affected his mental illness in any way.

“Hi Carlos! It's been a while since I've seen you. How are you?”

“I-I am good. How about yourself?”

He is sitting where the small table is located in a corner of the room. As he adjusts the camera, I see that he has a blue worn out notebook next to him. As he finishes adjusting his camera his two large tan hands are intertwined and are placed on the table. The way he's sitting up straight, attentive and ready to talk, did not seem like someone who has Autism at all. His eyes have a gleam on them showing the excitement of being interviewed. We casually start talking about the days he used to attend school before Covid. He tells me his whole schedule in an exact order then expresses his excitement in starting high school.

“What are you interested in at the moment?” I asked.

“Um...Um y-you know, I'm studying the New York city transit system.”

“Oh yes! I remember you have mentioned it. You even told me you know all the train stops and all the color trains by memory right?” As I ask, he unfolds his hands, nods his head and grabs the notebook next to him. He opens it and explains how every time they go to the train he would rewrite all the train stops. Considering that they do not own a car, before Covid, they would use the train frequently. I ask if this is just a hobby of his. “I-in the future, I want to work for the MTA and potentially work as a rail worker or any other jobs they provide.” At his

age, I don't recall knowing what I wanted to study; it leaves me amused. I asked, "what do you do to improve your knowledge about the Train system?" and he said, "I-I go and watch Youtube videos, go to google maps, look at the New York train website and read online articles. I search up things for the bus and train routes just to know what to do in the future." As I watch him talk, his big tan hands all over the screen as he's talking about the thing he loves the most. He is now more relaxed. He, a fourteen year old boy, knows what he wants to do in the future when many able minded people have zero clue what to do.

I recall learning how there are prejudice and discrimination towards people who fit in the category of ableism. Many believe that they are useless to society because they can't function like a "normal" person. The way my cousin talks about loving school and learning about a future job he wants to do, makes me realize that people like my cousin are not useless. Sure they may need assistance but that will not stop them from functioning like the rest of us. Many like him know what they want to do and I've read that they can even be smarter than the average person. With all the unfairness there is for ableism people, I now wonder if my cousin will be able to get a job once people find out he has Autism. People who are placed in the ableism category are not given a chance to prove to others that they are useful in society because many just give the shoulder and ignore them without trying.

As we talk more, we get into a more serious conversation. We talk about how even though he has Autism, it is not as severe as others. Even if it's low, when I met him for the first time, I knew he was different. I remember he was eleven year old when I met him. He talked in a formal and respectful way while he tried his best to not stutter. He did not have the characteristics of a child but of an adult. I asked, "What has been one of the ways you have seen people judge you for having Autism?" Carlos had his eyebrows smushed together and he thought

deeply. Both his large tan hands rubbed each other searching for comfort. “When I-I...many classmates don’t seem to like me. When I try to talk to them, they keep looking at each other and are quiet. Then they leave and don’t talk to me again...maybe it’s because they don’t like what I talk about?” he said. His big tan hands were on his side, limp as if not functioning anymore. His face all scrunched up. “What do you talk about?” I asked after a few seconds. “I like to show them what I’ve learned about the train system. Also I ask them questions like what they plan to do in the future, what are their thoughts on what we learned in class, stuff like that.” It makes sense that what my cousin Carlos wants to talk about doesn’t seem interesting to middle school kids. Kids in middle school like to talk about video games, movies, joke around with each other, not talk about school or more “mature” questions.

The way my cousin thinks can be more mature than his age level which is why it is hard for him to make friends. Yet he also has the mind of a child at some occasions. He tells me how sometimes he really wants to play in the playground with his younger brother but he gets intimidated by the states adults give him. He sees how some take their children away so they won't have to interact with him. He hears wipers and unpleasant face expressions. After he notices he asked his mom to leave so the others can play happily.

I’m speechless; I don’t know what to tell him. Never in my life have I felt being judged when I used to play in the playground nor have I had classmates distance themselves from me. What people don’t see as “normal,” they tend to distance themselves. It is something we as a society should work on. It is not fair for the people like my cousin to be seen as something to be away from. If an able person gets hurt seeing that, a person who is categorized in the ableism category hurts even more.

“It’s... it’s okay. I don’t mind. I have some friends who play with me and my mom buys me food like ice cream when we leave the park.” The sincere, innocent voice and calm expression makes me look at him. He is able to see all the good that there is in his life to not make himself feel down. I know that if I were in his shoes, I would not know how to handle what he goes through. His future is unknown. Will people let him work knowing that he has Autism? I don’t know, but I hope that by the time he’s an adult, a new view is shown for people who are now considered useless to society.