



In 2013 as Adam Harris was preparing to study at University College Dublin he took a sharp turn toward social entrepreneurship. Diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome as a young child, Adam was well-versed in the needs of those on the Autism spectrum yet keenly aware that the resources available to the Autism community in Ireland were less than optimal. So Adam put school on hold and started the AsIAM website. AsIAM.ie has now seen thousands of visitors and has become the premiere resource for those with Autism and their families. The Ireland Funds are assisting AsIAM with a grant to help rollout an awareness program about Autism in Irish schools.

*Adam Harris,  
founder of AsIAM*

# AS | AM

## *Adam Harris Creates a One-Stop-Shop for Those in Ireland Affected by Autism*

*Here, Adam tells in his own words what living with Autism is like and what his dreams are for a society of inclusion and full understanding.*



Autistic Spectrum  
Information Advice  
and Meeting Point

# Imagine, in the morning, arriving in an alien planet.

You step off your rocket and every smell, every noise, every texture, even the atmosphere feels totally unfamiliar, unpleasant and even scary.

Imagine you meet your first alien and you are trying really hard to communicate with him, to befriend him, but you can't read his facial expression or body language, you don't know if he wants to be taken literally or if he is joking, if he is angry or if he is welcoming you. Yet, he makes no effort whatsoever to try and communicate in a way in which you can understand.

You are not necessarily less intelligent than anyone else, but the way you learn and function is totally different to the alien population around you. In the alien workplace you join, you simply cannot cope, and you don't receive much support, you feel your colleagues exclude you, isolate you and sometimes are even mean to you.

Now understand, this is what many people with Autism in Ireland face every day. People with Autism are born with a disability, people with Autism struggle with social communication, interaction and imagination and find sensory processing difficult. Autism is a huge spectrum, with a wide variety of traits, strengths and challenges. No two people with Autism are the same, and many also have additional conditions. That said, people with Autism work very hard just to function in society every day, and yet society often plays a key factor in disabling people with the condition through not having enough knowledge or showing enough understanding, through underestimating people with the condition or not making allowances or showing understanding for where a person's needs lie. To sum it up, they see a label not a person or ignoring the needs all together.

This is why I set up AsIAM.ie, Ireland's online one stop shop for the Autism community which works to empower families affected by Autism and educate the general public to understand Autism better. I established AsIAM.ie because, at the age of 5, I was diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome, a condition on the high-functioning end of the Autism Spectrum. I was fortunate to benefit from early intervention though and, after 3 years in Special Education, was integrated into mainstream education, aged 8. By the time I was 16, I wanted to do something to give back to the Autism community. I had just begun to socialize myself and yet was taken aback by the attitude many people had towards the invisible condition which is Autism—many people were well-intentioned but patronising, while others simply saw a "problem" not a condition and had quite negative attitudes. This perhaps explains why 50% of people with Autism are bullied in school, 80% will struggle to find work after school and there is a 4 times higher rate of self-harm in the community. I set up AsIAM to bring all the knowledge and personal stories

around Autism into one place so people with Autism, their families and professional supporters would know they are not alone and could instead share the ultimate "expertise"—experience. However I also knew we could do much more than that, if we gave the community a voice in shaping Autism advocacy – we could bring this direct to the Irish public. I often say that the problem isn't Autism, it is "Pontius Pilate Syndrome"—the attitude that the government or medical researchers are the only groups with responsibility for Autism, but we know that no amount of money or research, by itself, will change the world for the better—we must change hearts and minds.

We have been delighted with the response we have received to date. We have done a huge amount of outreach work with local, voluntary support groups, setting up a Liaison Officer Network which brings local concerns to us, which we can raise awareness of on our national platform. We are heavily supported by Lions Clubs International, who have bought into this vision since the time I began my work 3 years ago, and were recently awarded a Social Entrepreneurs Ireland *Elevate Award*, which will help us bring our work to the next level, which will require funding and scaling. I am also lucky to have a strong, supportive Board of Directors, all professionals with a wealth of experience in various fields and experience of Autism.

*AsIAM is now rolling education and training programs out around Ireland. With the support of The Ireland Funds, we have developed a program for Secondary School students—which will reach 100 schools in 2015.* Our workshop highlights that students with Autism are students first—just with differences. Students are challenged to take responsibility for the issue, and produce and sign a charter for making their school more Autism-friendly. We work in advance of the workshop, to gauge the knowledge of students and also to find out any issues around Autism which already exist in the school. 50 speakers, all members of the Autism community, have now been trained to deliver this program. We will work with schools to implement these positive ideas in their schools. This program will develop further and over time be brought to both primary schools and to every secondary school.

This is only the beginning, in 2015 we will launch, AsWeAre, a community program where we challenge towns and individual stakeholders to learn and adapt for Autism. On our first birthday, in March, we will launch a program to educate and train employers to see possible employees with Autism, as assets instead of hassles, and to understand their customers with the condition. — Adam Harris, Founder of AsIAM

*The road is long but we are committed to working towards the next 100 years. We hope that with the help of The Ireland Funds, we will see a dynamic, inclusive society where people with Autism can make a positive contribution and play a full and active part.*