

AsIAM

BY ADAM HARRIS

ADAM HARRIS IS A 24-YEAR OLD SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR AND FOUNDER-CEO OF ASIAM, IRELAND'S NATIONAL AUTISM CHARITY. ADAM FOUNDED THE ORGANIZATION IN 2014 IN RESPONSE TO HIS OWN EXPERIENCES GROWING UP IN IRELAND AS AN AUTISTIC PERSON. THE IRELAND FUNDS HAVE BEEN KEY SUPPORTERS OF THE WORK OF ASIAM FROM AN EARLY STAGE AND ADAM SHARES WITH US WHY THIS SUPPORT HAS BEEN CRITICAL TO THE GROWTH OF THE ORGANIZATION. 

Autism is something which we have all become very “aware” of in recent years. Many of us can point to someone in our family or community who is on the autism spectrum and, if not, we can cite the names of a plethora of celebrities or television and fictional characters who are autistic. This is an important start – we cannot take any action if we do not realize this diversity exists. It is significant in an Irish context in particular. When I was a young child, this awareness did not exist. But in just 15 years, through a government policy shift towards inclusive education, we now have a reality that 86% of autistic young people attend mainstream school. However, awareness is just a start. The next steps, for meaningful inclusion must be understanding, empathy and action.

BUILDING CAPACITY, EDUCATING SOCIETY

I know this first hand. When I reached an age of self-awareness I did not want to discuss my autism for many years as I saw how people reacted when you mentioned that you were on the autism spectrum – desperately wanting to do the right thing but not knowing where to start. As a result, many of the barriers which autistic people experience today come from society’s response to those with the condition. The statistics bear this out. 80% of autistic adults are under or unemployed, autistic people are at least 9 times more likely to end their lives by suicide and access to basic public services such as education and healthcare remains a marked challenge.

I was lucky, by the time I was 16, to be in school independently with a strong group of friends – but this is far from the reality for the majority and I decided to take action in establishing AsIAM because I felt the challenges autistic people met were not inevitable but could be addressed through building the capacity of autistic people and their families and educating society to fully include the autism community.



A TEAM FOR GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

5 years on I am really excited about the progress which we are making. We are now a team of 12 staff members, half of us being autistic ourselves, ably supported and guided by an experienced, voluntary Board of Directors. Our Community Support Team provides guidance and support to autistic people and families who contact us – this ranges from basic sign-posting through to making complex representations to government bodies. In addition, it provides a range of training, support and information to autistic people and family members on managing the challenges that go with the condition and effectively advocating for yourself.

On the policy front, we have led efforts to secure a National Autism Strategy for Ireland and holding government to account in terms of providing equality of opportunity for our community. As the only National Charity undertaking this type of support role, there is a real need for us to grow our team in this area over the coming years to ensure that every family is adequately supported and the voice of the community heard at a national level.

UNIQUE INITIATIVES FOR IRELAND

Our Training and Business Advisory Team has led out on some highly unique initiatives around creating an autism-friendly society. The team operate a range of programs which start in early years settings and work their way up to supporting employers, gardai and businesses in supporting autistic members of the public using their services and opportunities. We were proud to support Dublin City University (DCU) in becoming the World's first Autism-Friendly University, and we are now rolling this initiative out across Ireland and indeed globally with the first US universities expected to be accredited by 2020.

In partnership with SuperValu, Ireland's leading retailer, we have rolled autism-friendly shopping times out across the country and supported Clonakilty in becoming the country's first autism-friendly town. In Clonakilty, over 100 organizations have undertaken training and put in place accessibility measures for autistic community members addressing the main barriers to inclusion for autistic people such as communication, predictability and control, sensory processing, judgement and attitudes.

This year we will support a further nine towns in making this commitment. This initiative, also known as the Clonakilty Commitment, follows a series of principles aimed at fostering autism inclusion and empowerment in local committees.

These are:

- Understandable staff training
- Environmental evaluation
- Assistance dog-friendly
- A commitment to enact at least one change in the community

Whilst lots has been achieved there is so much more to do. We passionately believe Ireland has strong communities who, with the right support, can help us make our country the the most accessible and inclusive place in the world for the autism community. The small size of Ireland has allowed us to innovate and develop programs which we believe can be brought to other jurisdictions over time. Our ultimate goal is to be redundant and that will be achieved when we can safely say every autistic person born in Ireland has the opportunity to reach their own personal potential, whatever that may look like, and fully participate in every aspect of Irish life.

THANKS TO THE IRELAND FUNDS

We have been incredibly lucky to be supported by The Ireland Funds from day one of this journey. We were not long-established when our Secondary School Program, which aims to address bullying of autistic students through peer education, received a grant from The Ireland Funds' Small Grant Round of €3,000 in 2014. This enabled us to develop and pilot the program, which has now been delivered in well over 100 schools across the country.

Creating an Autism-Friendly University requires significant investment and from the day I explained the concept to The Ireland Funds' team they understood its importance in terms of providing opportunities for adults and ultimately reducing unemployment in the autism community, the team proactively sought support from the initiative and has secured €300,000 to date.

It has been a true privilege to be invited to many Ireland Funds' events in both Ireland and the United States and to meet so many amazing members of The Ireland Funds' family. It is truly special knowing that there is a network of people around the world who want to support work such as ours and many have demonstrated this proactively to us with generous personal donations towards supporting our information and training services.

I want to thank all donors for the work you do and all your support to date. ASIAM could not have the impact we do without the help of The Ireland Funds.

Autism facts

80%

of autistic adults are under or unemployed.



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