

# Adulthood on the Spectrum: Why I got the COVID vaccine

## **Andrew M. Komarow**

Welcome to "Adulthood on the Spectrum," I'm Andrew an autistic certified financial planner. I co-run "Adulthood on the Spectrum," with Eileen Lam. Hey, Eileen.

## **Eileen Lamb**

Hey everyone! I am Eileen Lamb. In this podcast, we want to highlight real voices of autistic adults, not just inspirational stories, but real people talking about their boring life. Basically, we want to give a voice to people like us.

## **Andrew M. Komarow**

Today, our guest is Katie Santoro. Katie Santoro graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign?

## **Andrew M. Komarow**

Urbana-Champaign. After graduation she struggled to find her niche in the working world. She was diagnosed with autism at 24. Her diagnosis put her on a path to being an autism advocate. She is passionate about DEAI Initiatives and is certified DEAI through the University of South Florida. Katie was an arts advocate long before her autism advocacy days. She is a Miami Herald Silver Knight Award winner in the Drama Category. And in addition to her side business, she loves to volunteer. She is president of the Unicorn Children's Foundation Junior board, as well as being president for UCF. She is a contributing member for the ELS for Autism and Center for Autism at University of Miami. Her life goal is to travel all seven continents while her current count sits at five. During her travels at home and abroad. She likes to read, practice yoga and hike.

## **Katie Santoro**

That's right, Andrew all seven continents by the time I'm 30. And to clarify what side business I do, I'm very active in dog sitting. I had four chihuahuas at my place like last week, so keep them busy.

## **Eileen Lamb**

Hey, Katie, thanks for coming on our podcast today. We always start by asking our guests how they like to identify as part of, you know, autism. So I'm talking about do you say I have autism? Or I'm autistic? I'm on the spectrum? Or do you have no preference?

## **Katie Santoro**

I like to use autistic because I don't feel that autism should have any kind of stigma. And at the end of the day, autism is just like a neuro type like how your brain is. So autistic works just fine. It's not like you know person with autism. I don't really think that that goes that well, because you know, that person. You know, it's just part of who you are. So I like to say autistic.

## **Andrew M. Komarow**

Katie, could you tell us more about your autism diagnosis? You mentioned, you know, when you were diagnosed, but what was the process like and what led you to it?

**Katie Santoro**

Um, yeah, I think that really, you know, autism can affect different areas such as, like social communication, it can affect employment, it can affect school and learning, you know, executive functioning, if you have trouble there, then that can affect like your schooling and how you learn. And so, for me, that definitely was a case like school. I mean, there were years where like, I was a straight A student, and I did really well, but towards my senior year of college, it just was like, increasingly difficult. I really wasn't even sure if I was going to graduate. But I did go back and graduate. So I have my degree. And also, I just struggled, you know, finding acceptance in the employment world, a lot of I think that, you know, when people hear me speak, they don't think that I'm autistic. But they haven't had enough interaction with me like, which a lot of my coworkers who see me every day, I have found that even in my current job, there's a lot of misunderstandings of coworkers. So I think that maybe the misunderstandings and communication and stuff with my past jobs and the coworkers not knowing that I was autistic, caused me to get fired from those jobs, because I didn't have any protective way to say, hey, I have a disability. So they just fill in the blanks themselves, like...oh, she's super quirky or whatever, we just cannot have this in the workplace. And I don't even know what I can't even tell you what exactly might have been the problems as far as the communication with coworkers and stuff, but yeah, I know that I struggled. I lost like a lot of jobs. But today I work at Cardinal Health in the office, and yeah, I love my company because they really value inclusion and that we have people of all different races, ethnicities, and different levels of ability at all levels of our company.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

And what led you to get the diagnosis, formal assessment? What, did you seek it out or

**Katie Santoro**

Well, what happened was it was like, I kind of had a quarter life crisis. I don't know, like it was, you know, I just kind of knew when I was graduating college I had this innate knowing like, how am I gonna just do adult things like live independently, the most basic things live independently and, you know, have a job. I felt like everybody had this clear directive of where they were going, they're gonna be a doctor or lawyer or speech pathologist, whatever it might be. And I just kind of felt what I don't really know what I am going to do. And so yeah, really, was the employment and the school piece. And I had been seeing a therapist who knew different things about me such as, like my lack of eye contact, and things like that. And kind of I sent her an email when I started experiencing struggles and work in school and different areas that my autism was affecting, you know, my day to day. And she told me that I knew for like, two years that I felt that you kind of had like Asperger's, which I personally don't like that term, because of the historical implications that go with it. But at the time, that's what she said that she thought I had Asperger's for a while, but she felt it was no use and telling me because I was functioning, just fine. And to note that I think that all clinicians out there should always just, if you're thinking that your client might have a certain diagnosis, it's always best to like, discuss your theories with them, because I think your client is the best source of knowledge, and you can

make your own observations. But you know, I probably would have told her have we discussed it, I would have found out earlier and would have agreed with her. But I think that there was a little like, she was afraid to say anything. And so then when she said she, she suggested that I found a resource through the University of Miami Center for Autism, they kind of help people get official diagnosis, she was not a therapist was not the source of official diagnosis because she wasn't licensed. So then I had to go through the University of Miami Center for Autism, and go through the process of they give referrals, that's what they do is they give referrals to parents and resources on, you know, what you might need to get an autism diagnosis and what resources you might need after that diagnosis. So the first clinician actually told me, I couldn't have autism, because I speak but um, that I don't agree with that clinician, I think that's a bad clinician. And then the second clinician gave me my official diagnosis. So I really got the diagnosis through University of Miami Center for Autism through the referral process. And, yeah, and the reasons why we're, you know, I really was trying to figure out my place in the working world, like how to hold a job because as you know, like, not sure the exact number but the thing is over 80% of people with autism are unemployed, or if they are employed, they're this term called underemployed where they're employed under their skill set, like maybe they have a master's degree, but they're not totally utilizing it.

### **Eileen Lamb**

And Katie, in your bio, you're talking about becoming a Silver Knight, do you want to tell people what it is and how that happens?

### **Katie Santoro**

Yeah. So for the Silver Knight Award, I was in high school, and in high school I was doing really well. People were like, well, why are you late diagnosis. And I think that in college, you kind of lose a lot of the structure that you might have in high school. People say, oh, when you're in high school, you know, you're living at home, you have more support, more structure. And then in college, you kind of have to do more time management, more executive functioning is placed on you. But in high school, I did really well. And I was in theater, and I did a lot of volunteering. So the Silver Knight is for a volunteer project. And so my volunteer project was going to speak to Congress about arts funding and getting more funding for the local arts communities because I was involved in like Broward Center for the Performing Arts, Young Children's Museum and Florida Children's Theater. And the when Congress are looking at the budgets, they often the arts are the first thing that they usually cut. They don't think that they're as important as math and science, but the arts have lots of benefits such as increased self-esteem better, you know, I think that the arts helped me a lot and my speaking ability and just being outspoken I think that without theatre, and it helped me in my ability to make friends. I think I would have been diagnosed sooner because I would have been on a weekend instead of being at theater classes. I would have been home. But so I obviously struggled to stay on topic and answer the questions, but basically The Silver Knight is given to the top 1% of high school seniors in my area for volunteer service, like I spoke on Capitol Hill and I went to the National Endowment for the Arts press conference. That was a private invite when I got there. And Debbie Wasserman Schultz was there and some other celebrities. Like Alec Baldwin was there. And yeah, so it was a really good award. And it was for you know, trying to help the arts and stuff.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Awesome. So you like to also travel as well. I think I know, one of the seven continents you're probably missing. Probably the really cold one.

**Katie Santoro**

Yeah.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

What are what are the two?

**Katie Santoro**

Um, yeah, so Antarctica, I haven't been there yet. But I will love to go kayak with people like what are you going to do there? And I'm telling you, I'm gonna kayak with the glaciers and see the penguins and probably whale watch. It's gonna be fun. And also, I haven't been to Australia. So that will be cool. They have lots of kangaroos there. And I like animals. And like, in Thailand, when I went to Thailand, I worked on an elephant. Speaking of animals, I worked on an elephant rescue there. It's called Elephant Nature Park, if you want to look it up on Facebook. Very amazing owner, they're doing lots of good work for the animals. And let's see in Africa, I've been to Morocco, all over Europe. And of course, I live in North America. So that one wasn't too hard because I was born here. So I didn't have to work too hard for that one. Yeah, so two more to go. By the time I'm 30. The goal is to go to all seven by 30.

**Eileen Lamb**

And we want to so you know, with the pandemic, obviously travel has been affected a lot. Did you choose to get vaccinated? And if so why?

**Katie Santoro**

Yeah, I forgot that I didn't mentioned South America. I went to Peru during the pandemic, actually. And I was there a month. And so I remember when all this vaccine stuff came about. And Mike, I was I was working on an office job at the time, helping with data management, like I was helping scan paper files to become digital, to take all their files and make them digital. And so I listened to a lot of my coworkers were talking about it. I think some of them were nervous. And actually, yeah, I think there were a lot of people were like, Oh, I don't want to get it or anything. But then eventually, like some of them got it to some of my coworkers got it before me. They said it was fine. It was safe and effective. And I decided to get the vaccine because I wanted to travel. That was the whole reason, like you said, like, um, travel had been affected. But so yeah, I had pushed off this Peru trip, you know, actually, I was scheduled to go to Peru. And a week before my trip, they close the border. So I am just lucky that I didn't get stuck there. But yeah, they shut the border down. So then I had to delay it. So by the time the vaccine came around, I was already really ready to go. And they suggested that you know, to travel, you might have to have the vaccine and I think that some places, you may not need it now. But at the time, that's what we thought so I got vaccinated because I wanted to, you know, go back to normal and thankfully now like my office, we're at a place where we don't need to wear masks. I don't

know. I think that's pretty much the case everywhere. Unless of course you're high risk. Then there's some people if they're immunocompromised, they, they might want to wear a mask don't but I don't know what do you guys? Do you guys think that the do you do still have to wear masks? Any places that you'd go? Or is that kind of not a requirement these days?

**Eileen Lamb**

Here in Texas, it's mostly like medical, like I went to get my blood drawn yesterday at the lab and it was masked mandatory but like at the grocery store, even at school, it's not mandatory anymore for my kids.

**Katie Santoro**

That's probably why it's good to get the vaccine because they say that vaccine will help protect you. So if you're not wearing masks if other people are not wearing masks and the vaccine is a good, good option.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

And lots of vaccines are already common for needing to travel to other countries anyway that we don't normally get here so.

**Katie Santoro**

That's right.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

So what made it easier for you to get the vaccine and did anything make it more difficult? We could start with the easier.

**Katie Santoro**

Um, I think it was pretty simple. I just, I think if I recall, like I just made an appointment and went to like the CVS. So I guess the fact that CVS or Walgreens was offering it, you don't have to make this special doctor's appointment. It was accessible.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

What, what, if anything, made it more difficult or made you a little hesitant?

**Katie Santoro**

I think that, you know, it just makes it more difficult when you hear people saying bad things about the vaccine, you know, there was a lot of debate, people you hear on the news or on your social media feed everywhere, people would be like anti-vaccine, or some people are saying the vaccine is good. So the constant back and forth me that kind of like, okay, how do you decide like, which side is best?

**Eileen Lamb**

Yeah, as the getting the vaccine changed your life at this point in the pandemic? You know, because you can maybe travel more now, like, are you, are you happy with your decision?

**Katie Santoro**

Um, yeah, I was happy with my decision. I mean, for example, um, Peru is not the only place I've went during COVID. I also went to Costa Rica. And, you know, for that, I went to Costa Rica for a yoga retreat, and everybody that went to that retreat, the teacher required that everybody be vaccinated, so I would have missed out on the retreat had not gotten a vaccine. So I think travel has really been a main factor in my decision. To get vaccinated.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

And what's the next place that you're excited to travel to?

**Katie Santoro**

Antarctica.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

But how do you get there?

**Katie Santoro**

It's very expensive, I won't share the cost. Because it will very much surprised you. But you can go do your own research. And I'm gonna fly Ushuaia. I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing it correctly, Argentina. It's the tip of Argentina and you get on a cruise. And I'm probably gonna go with Oceanwide or Silver Seas Cruises. And, you know, so, yeah, and then it's like a two week cruise. So, and my dog sitting is going to fund that trip. So that's exciting. So I get to hang out with dogs and do what I love every day and then go to Antarctica. And people ask me, well, like, there's just ice there, right? I'm like, well, you know, when I come back, I'll let you know if it was the trip of a lifetime. Or if it was just boring ice.

**Eileen Lamb**

It's awesome. Okay, we I mean, I'm going to ask you some quickfire questions. It's super easy. You just tell me the first thing that comes to your mind. Okay. What is your favorite food or drink?

**Katie Santoro**

Um, well, I'll just give a shout out to my favorite restaurant. There's 10 locations in the US and Canada. It's at Planta, it's a new vegan place and yeah, I just went there last night for unlimited vegan sushi and it was amazing. So,

**Eileen Lamb**

Unlimited?

**Katie Santoro**

Unlimited. I went with I don't eat too much but I went with two people who love to eat so I was I was very full on my unlimited vegan sushi. So yeah, Planta so they just opened a location in Fort Lauderdale in many locations in Florida but in New York City in Toronto all over.

**Eileen Lamb**

Well, I think I know the answer to this question but I'll ask anyway. If you couldn't be any animal more fictional or real? What would what would you choose and why?

**Katie Santoro**

I guess a dog right? Because I'm a dog sitter and dogs have a pretty good life. You know, like they sleep in their owners bed and you know, play fetch all day.

**Eileen Lamb**

What is one of your special interest?

**Katie Santoro**

Um, I would say I really like Taylor Swift. I dressed up for her like when I was a kid with the whole like, cowboy boots and hat and guitar and everything and I'm most recently went to a Taylor Swift dance party for the second time where Taylor Swift is not there. But the DJ just plays Taylor Swift dance music all night like it's, it's four hours of only Taylor Swift music and some people I went with we're not diehard Taylor Swift fans, so they were like this is too much Taylor. And I was like you cannot have too much Taylor. (all laugh)

**Eileen Lamb**

What's your favorite autistic representation in the media? Fictional or not?

**Katie Santoro**

As far as like, you know, TV series goes, I've most recently watched "As We See It." And I thought, "As We See It," was, you know, great, Or we have "Love on the Spectrum." And both of those are amazing shows and have great representations.

**Eileen Lamb**

Do you have a favorite quote or saying and if so, who said it?

**Katie Santoro**

Um, I think that's a very tough one. So I feel a little unprepared. But I like to just have a positive outlook on life. So I think like, just saying, like, the best is yet to come. Like, you know, things are always on an upward trend. So

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Well lets hope the COVID numbers aren't. Anyway, okay, we're gonna so,

**Katie Santoro**

Everything is at an upward trend, but COVID.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Because everyone's got the vaccine.

**Katie Santoro**

All the positivity is on an upward trend to keep positive, but just low COVID.

**Andrew M. Komarow**

Because everyone got the vaccine because,

**Katie Santoro**

Be positive that there's gonna be low COVID numbers. That's great, Andrew,

**Andrew M. Komarow**

There we go. So hope for a negative test, not a positive one bunch of mismatch anyway. Where can we find you on social media?

**Katie Santoro**

Yeah, I run our autism advocacy Instagram. It's called autistic.thegreeklife. I called it that because, you know, I joined a sorority, and I think that that's an interesting fact. Not everyone knows that someone with autism could be in a sorority. So true. So find me on Instagram at autistic.thegreeklife and follow my journey there.

**Katie Santoro**

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for coming on our podcast today and for speaking with us about traveling and vaccines, and we hope everyone has a great day.

**Katie Santoro**

Bye

**Eileen Lamb**

Bye