

Adulthood on the Spectrum: Finding My Calling helping the autism community

Andrew M. Komarow

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

Eileen Lamb

Hey, Andrew. Hey everyone, I'm Eileen Lamb. And 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

And today, our guest is Tony. Tony is a bilingual autistic author, writer, motivational speaker, podcaster and international advocate for autism, mental health and other causes. He was born and raised in Puerto Rico currently lives in Florida. Tony works with Autism Speaks as part of the Autism Response Team, which is an information line for the autism community. As part of his resume, Tony has 10 years of working in customer service sales management, and also done work on television where he had a segment about autism on Univision.

Eileen Lamb

Hey, Tony, thanks for joining us today.

Tony Hernandez

Thank you so much. You know, this is like a dream for me to be with you guys. So thank you so much. And I thank you for what you guys do for the community.

Eileen Lamb

Oh, thank you.

Andrew M. Komarow

So, so Tony, I'm going to actually change the script slightly. How much are you getting paid to be here today promoting Autism Speaks agenda.

Tony Hernandez

I gotta say that I thought I was going to get a question like that. But no, not being paid.

Andrew M. Komarow

Zero, right? ,

Tony Hernandez

This is Tony Hernandez Pumarejo, who has been an advocate for 10 years, I have done work for the autism, in the autism space so.

Eileen Lamb

Just for the record (all laugh)

Andrew M. Komarow

Just for the record, yeah, you're being paid just as much as we are? Zero, just trying to help the community. So Eileen, so I stole your first question that usually ask away. So I'll get that back to you now.

Eileen Lamb

Thank you. So Tony, we, we always ask our guests, how they like to identify and we're talking about, you know, autistic person with autism, and also your preferred pronouns?

Tony Hernandez

Well, in terms of the preference, I know there's a first person that third person, sometimes you may see me change terms as a person on the spectrum, or an autistic person. Sometimes I may go to ask for your reason for this, because that was my original diagnosis. But to be honest, and I know there's a debate in terms of that, I have no preference in regards to what I'm being called. And in terms of pronouns, I never understood the prominent theme, to be honest, with all due respect, but I guess I'll go with him and he.

Andrew M. Komarow

Can you tell us more about yourself? Your story, we'd like to say boring lives, and maybe yours isn't so boring. We hope it's interesting. And just you mentioned as burgers is the term when you were diagnosed, so you must have been diagnosed, you know, at least several years ago, and tell us what that was like. Tell us your story.

Tony Hernandez

Well, thank you, Andrew. And Eileen, again. My name is Antonio Hernandez Pumarejo. And that's my full name. But I go by Tony. Was born and raised in Puerto Rico, I was diagnosed with autism at age three, this is a '93. I was born in 1990. Back in the early '90s, there was not a lot of information about autism as it is today. And because of this, my parents were they were told different things in terms of what I had. They even, you know like I had this or I have this or disorder or anything. They even told my mom that I was a retard. And this was not just anybody, it was a Official from the Department of Education in Puerto Rico. And the term "retard" was used more often at that time to describe different differences and conditions, way back then. And after that I was able to receive the diagnosis at age three as autism simply autism. Because this was a year before the DSM-IV. I don't know if you guys remember that DSM-IV was released in 1994. That's when they came to terms. Autism, Asperger's

and there were two other types. I forget the names right now. But as a person on the spectrum, I was completely nonverbal until age four. Struggled with severe social anxiety disorder, which I still deal with it to this very day. Struggles with communication. Struggles with making friends and understanding what other people did. Repetitive behaviors, problems with eye contact, so many things, but the biggest challenge was connecting with others. And this led to different types of situations as I was growing up in school, like facing social rejection, bullying, and many other tough situations. And one of the examples is in my culture. We all, we laugh a lot. We tell jokes and gossip and all that stuff. And for example, with the different types of jokes I didn't laugh or didn't follow through and the other kids thought, you know, they thought about they took that as a sign of disrespect that I was disrespecting them. And that was not the case I was having difficulties understanding what they did. And then that led to different situations. I am the third of four children. My mom, my parents were divorced at age five. So I went through that tough situations, sometimes you see the some autism family all perfect and the, you know, the child on the spectrum receives all the love and care and unity,

Andrew M. Komarow

And if you follow Eileen's Instagram, that's exactly what you will see all the time. Sarcasm there for, by the way. Okay. Yeah,

Tony Hernandez

Yeah. And I have issues with sarcasm too. So with all do respect sometimes, when they you know, I don't follow through is that I'm not being disrespectful. I have difficulties and that with all due respect. But I'm not saying that my parents didn't support me, they did support me. But there was a lot of challenges. We lived with my mom for the first year, and then my mom had to leave Puerto Rico because she was diagnosed with MS. What is MS? It is Multiple sclerosis, which is the same disease that unfortunately my aunt her sister passed away at age 46, in 2008. Then we moved to my dad. Another thing is that this was a lot of changes going on. We were had had to deal with and struggle with all these changes changing school also. So it was in other words, to make it simple. I was receiving a lot of technical hits from life. You know, I was it's like rocks being thrown at me. And, and then the interesting part of this journey is that I didn't know about autism until age of 14. Age 14 was the first time I heard about autism was diagnosed at three, but I didn't find out the issue.

Eileen Lamb

You mentioned the bullying, too. And that's something that's really close to my heart, because my youngest is dealing with it. I dealt with it when I was a child too. Do you feel like talking about this? Do you think there's anything we can do to educate people about bullying in the autism community?

Tony Hernandez

In going to my bullying situation, I went through what is called cyber bullying, where this was seen in high school 2006, 2007. I have a situation in which, you know, I was receiving the bullying attacks, I was being attacked as a homosexual.. I was being attacked as a monster that wanted to kill people. And I'm sorry, I'm talking like this. But I'm talking about the way that the things that when I was going

through back then, also 2007, they stole my identity. They created fake profiles, I think called MySpace back then, which was the most popular platforms out of that that still exist, but they stole my identity. And they created trick profiles, and they said horrible things. And that led me to clinical depression and suicidal thoughts. That's what it began, which continued on for a couple of years. So in going into the bullying and what should we do? It's not anything to do is not a clear answer, we can talk about raising more awareness about the different situations of bullying. But until we solve the core issues in our society, we're never, you know, we're not going to be able to get to where we want to build a inclusive world, a more accepting and respect the world to respect the differences. You know, so we had to work together, firstly, in our community, because they're bullying in our community, and I have to say it, but also in our society as well. We have to work together to create a more inclusive environment. And it starts, it starts with us. And it starts with us to be able to improve and be able to work together. I don't know if that answers your question, or

Eileen Lamb

yeah, thank you.

Andrew M. Komarow

Yeah. So you advocate for adults, on the severe end of the spectrum, what do you think we can do to ensure that, you know, everyone gets the support they deserve? I think I heard a radio advertisement Autism Speaks. I was listening to Bloomberg last month. And it was I think I'm paraphrasing, but we just want everyone with autism to live like their best lives. I don't think I haven't exactly correct, but it was potential, which is, so what does that again, mean to you? And what can we do to you know, ensure that mission is achieved?

Tony Hernandez

That's a very excellent question. I know that there's, as part of our debates in our community, we have to talk about this is something there's, you know, I don't know how to say it, sorry. Um, there's not enough talk about severe autism. Now, that doesn't mean that only advocate for severe people that have more severe autism advocate for everybody. You know, what is level one, two, and three. So the whole thing is that we need to talk more about that, and not that don't tell and, and let's not get ourselves wrong. I mean, people with a high functioning autism have their own challenges. And they also need support as well but it's different. It is very important to be able to all sorry, all everything that is important here is education, to be able to learn about autism and impacts each individual because it's different beyond the level one, two and three. And unfortunately, there's not been a lot of talk about severe autism, whether it's media or in our social media because they have a picture of autism at the height function. And that's only once autism, for example, you have different groups that are called themselves this and they say, that they are, they represent autism, which is not the case that they only a part of the autism world, as I call it. But in other words, you know, what, I don't want to separate from your question. Our communities' mission, despite the debates, despite the divisions is one thing, quality of life. Supports, help each individual on the spectrum, knowing their strengths, and their challenges, and work with them. To be able to achieve a better quality of life. I've always believed as an advocate, that whether you're nonverbal or you're verbal, or you need more support 24/7, each

individual can achieve a better life, that's, I always see it. That's why I've been fighting as an advocate for the entire community for almost 10 years, is for education first, you know, be able to get more together as a community, which is the key to get more together as a community first, and then work with society together to achieve that goal. Whether you're a child on the spectrum or an adult.

Eileen Lamb

I loved your answer. It's, it's something that's really close to my heart, too, to make sure that everyone on the on the spectrum is represented on social media. AND in in the media just goes like this, you know, like, you look at those TV shows and movies, and you know, they feel like very inclusive because, well, there's an autistic person, but it's always the same type of autistic person, like almost like genius, like kind of quirky with, you know.

Andrew M. Komarow

Just like me, right, Eileen?

Tony Hernandez

Or like me. Like I have been on television.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, tell us about that. What was it like as an artistic person working in television?

Tony Hernandez

So yeah, so before, you know, the way in which I've got the television, going back to a little bit to my story, if you guys don't mind, because I left it in high school. So I graduated from high school, I went to college, I had struggles in college, the good thing is, I don't have to deal with the bullying. In college, which was good. When I was struggling in making friends. I felt like an alien. You know, when I when I was in college, or different places, I was like, What's wrong with me? And that's it. I'm being honest. People get what you're saying, You're, there's something wrong with me. I said, I'm saying that that's what I felt at that time. But sometimes people make it may take that as you're not, you're not proud of that, which was part of the things we're talking about. But I went, I went to college, I moved to Puerto Rico, from Puerto Rico to Florida, I got my first job. And this is I got a job in an area, which according to society, I'm not, we're not supposed to be doing, which is customer service. The reason why is because customer service is 100% social communication, is a very fast paced environment. And people told me that I was not going to make it there. And I thought that I was not going to make it there. Go ahead. Sorry.

Andrew M. Komarow

So this is actually one of the questions that we were going to ask and I think you were going about to get there. So I'm also in a, you know, a customer service sales based role and you know, it's one of those where get out it's not commonly thought of or you're not able to make it so what made you so kind of a two part a bit more specific? What made you know, want to do that in the first place was it you know, the only job available was there you know, a reason why did you excel at it? Assuming that

you did which we're going to assume? And you know, what, um, you know, also what, what struggles did you have and at any advice you can give on how you overcame that specifically in what's considered a sales and customer service role because this is just such a huge misconception that I think it's really important.

Tony Hernandez

Yes, what happened was I moved to Florida, I was trying to get a job according that will be a fit for me as a person on the spectrum. Reason for it is because I don't know if you guys remember there was an article by Dr. Temple Grandin. And was she put the list of jobs right recommended for people on the spectrum. These people on the spectrum can do this job. But there's a list of jobs in which are now recommended for people on the spectrum and cashier was one of them. And the thing is, I was looking for more of a position that it will require less social communication that will require less dealing with people. That was back then. The thing is, that I wasn't that I was having difficulty finding that job. I was not able to find it. It took me months and the thing is, at that time I was living with my mom and we got to financial difficulties. So as a result of that, I had to put them on ice. Okay, let me find whatever came by because we were in a recession back then this is 2012. And, and I applied for the position of cashier recommended by vocational rehabilitation. I worked with VR, a little bit not successful. But they referred me to apply to this place, the big, big retail box stores, you know, when you know, we're gonna let you guys when I'm talking about the big stores like Wal-marts. And that's the first challenge that I had is a anxiety and dealing with severe anxiety, going to the interviews, by mindset, the way I was able to surpass and to survive the interviews was that I focus on one thing, what can I contribute, hey, this is what I contribute to your to your business, this is what I have done. This is what I can do for you, despite my challenges. And I went through struggles, and hope I was able to get the job, then I got into the environment. And you guys got being this job as a cashier felt like being in school, again. Because I was dealing with different types of people, different types of personalities, they were nice people. And they were other people that were special. And what I mean by special is, they were very nice. And it was so fast paced, because if you're working retail owners, you guys know anybody that's working retail is you have to be fast paced, you have to be here, you have to multitask as a cashier, and I'm struggling badly, I thought was not going to survive. And that went to a severe depression, because it got to a point in which I was blaming everybody that was blaming my past,

Andrew M. Komarow

What made you survive? So you started the job out of necessity, you stepped outside your comfort zone? And then while you spent 10 years doing it, so I imagine it got better? How did it get better?

Tony Hernandez

Well, it came to one important moment in 2012 20,13. In fact, I was so depressed, so frustrated with myself, that, you know, I felt like, I felt like I was a failure in life. And I almost ended my life in that year. But it got to a point in which I had to put everything under in perspective. And I had to say, hey, I can no longer blame the past, the past is done. There's no, there's no time machine, there's no way to go back. There's no way to go back and fix. But what I can do is to work on myself, and not let others

and determine what I can and cannot do. And moving on to accomplish my goals. And this was the moment this was a key moment and also as an advocate. So I'm going to mention in just a little bit. And then I began to continue to improve, I began to improve my social skills to the best of my ability.

Andrew M. Komarow

So but to challenge you for a little bit. That's, that is very important. As somebody who's struggled with very similar things I can relate. But if somebody's listening, and they're also very depressed because they're working a cashier job, you know, it's inspirational, but what practical tips can you give us so like, you know, you know, it can be very, it's almost impossible, right to like, you know, somebody's depressed and be like, No, I just found it within myself. And now I'm able to do it. But for somebody who's in that situation right now, and is hard getting day to day, what like one or two? Just very practical, simple tips. Can you give somebody who's in a retail job where they're struggling, and they're overwhelmed? What did you do to make your work experience better?

Tony Hernandez

Well, a couple of tips, one, focus on building your social skills, get out of the comfort zone, the more people the more you talk to people, the better. Don't limit yourself in that area. Also, I was going to you know, also another tip is to be able to learn to be, you know, learned at different skills. You know, don't let the a lot of times we let the challenge or the limitation determine what we can do. You have to be open minded. And that's what I tell everybody, when I'm advocating, we a lot of times we let limitations continue determine what we can or cannot do. Learn as I said, training, take every opportunity to grow, have a proactive relationship with your supervisor. I know I know is not everybody has the best supervisor in the world, I understand that. But you have you know, you may hate your job, you may feel depress, but you had to find a way and again, this you know, you guys, it's different for each individual. And you know, to find a way to find one thing that you want to learn from this job, work on it, because it will help you to be able to grow not only to get a better job later on mostly in your career. So as I said, there's a couple of things that you know, when I tell it again, each person is different and especially on the spectrum. But that's one thing you know, for one for me, one thing is different then for all of you, or each person on the spectrum is one thing that you had to work on, to be able to survive in those types of jobs. And again, each person in the spectrum is different. Each person is not, not everybody's going to do retail jobs, not everybody's going to do sales and all that. And I understand that. But that doesn't mean that the person on the spectrum, others in the spectrum are incapable of doing anything. They're capable of doing something. We have, again, work with individuals, learn from them, and learn from them and work with them to achieve their true potential. Hopefully, that answers the question, or

Eileen Lamb

I think it does Andrew, does it?

Andrew M. Komarow

Yeah. No, and I think that that's a good tip is no matter where you are taking take away, you know, one important thing, one useful thing for the next stage, you know, in your journey.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah. And speaking of the next step in your journey, you now work at Autism Speaks. Can you tell us about your job there? I know, you're part of what's called the Autism Response Team. Um, some people are familiar with it. And it's one thing I love about Autism Speaks. So if you could tell us more about it, that would be great.

Tony Hernandez

Definitely. I haven't missed the TV part yet, which I want to talk about before we end the interview. So yes, I work with the Autism Response Team with Autism Speaks. My journey to Autism Speaks as a story in itself. And the reason for it is because I've been applying for years, my relationship with Autism Speaks was not very, you know, very in sync, to put it that way. Because I was part of that group. That was not a fan of it. But what convinced me to join Autism Speaks is, hey, let's focus on my mission. Again, what became my mission, if I can do something, working with a greater with Autism Speaks, that makes a difference for our community. And I was able to do that, then I'll be proud. And hey lets work with this, let's work together as a community to get all together. So I applied for Autism Speaks, for the first time in 2017, for the ART position for the Autism Response position. Then I reapply again, in 2018. I did the interviews and all of that, but there was a situation in which the position closed and it was moved to a different location. But I never lost communication with Autism Speaks, we kept ourselves in communication. Then last year, I applied for the position again. And this time, and I remember because, you know, Lindsay Naeder, she remembered me from the interviews that I did three years prior. So they wanted it was to create, you know, that was able to do the interviews, I did interviews with Andrew, everybody. And they offered me the position. And I felt so relieved, because I was still in retail for 10 years, and my back was killing me because working as a retail manager, it's not easy. And so working with the Autism Response Team throughout this year, I have learned more, you know, a little bit of if you don't know what the Autism Response Team it is, or what they do, are explained right now, the Autism Response Team is an information line that works for the community. We receive calls, emails, messages from everybody that is impacted by autism, whether it's parents, autistic, self advocates, professionals, therapists, looking for information or resources and supports from across the country, and not only the country, but also other parts of the world, especially in Latin America. And, and I learned in this position, you know, that the trends, and what I mean by trends is, you know, what is what the people are looking for what are parents are looking for what autistic individuals are looking for, the professionals are looking for, I learned about different situations. In this job, I learned more of our community in this position, because right now, autism became officially my full time job, I was no longer retail now autism became become my full time job. And I have learned so many things, so many things that I wish in our community, some issues in which I wish to in our community is being taught, you know, we talk about more often than some of these things that for me, with all due respect, takes us away, especially the divisions takes us away from what our mission should be. Quality of life is not complicated. And for example, and I want to mention a couple of things, it's a couple of situations. That goes to my point, I receive situations of families homeless, I have received many cases of autistic adults from this in jail. There's so many situations that, unfortunately, are not talked about a lot in our community. So I'm very proud to be able it's not easy, especially this one month for me, honestly, April, you know, this was the most exhausting

April I've ever had. Because I was working in ART and also working in my other areas as well. But you do the job to make a difference you can make be that lifesaver for that family for that specific individual. And I'm very proud and honored to be part of the response team and not only working with the response team by doing other things for our great organization. So I'm very proud and privileged and honored and blessed to be with Autism Speaks.

Andrew M. Komarow

So so does the Autism Response Team just help people find gay conversion therapy and access to eugenics? That's a bit of sarcasm, or like, can you give us? You know, and I think it's true. You know, there's a lot of people where there is no other resource, right? Not everyone has the ability, especially, you know, again, minority or homelessness, or can you tell us about assuming you can disclose it, you know, just, you know, a moment where you really made a difference for like this one person, the story or just an example of somebody who called in who you were able to help? Do you have any examples?

Tony Hernandez

I have a couple, obviously, without disclosing the identity, at the exact situation. I have this family that was, you know, not this family, sorry, but autistic individual that was reaching out to us multiple times.

Andrew M. Komarow

So, wait, hold on, hold on. So first, man, I think many would be surprised that autistic individuals contact the Autism Response Team, and that not every autistic individual hates Autism Speaks, and that you actually are an autistic individual providing free help and support to other autistic individuals. I mean, that sounds pretty amazing. So I just want to say is that before I let you answer the question that I just asked, is that a lot is that a higher portion than most people would believe that it's not just families that there are lots of adults out there? If you're homeless, you don't care about identity language on the internet, if you're an autistic homeless person, that's your not your number one concern just is that a higher percentage than some might be led to believe?

Tony Hernandez

Yes, it's a higher percentage. And a lot of times, they don't like that they don't disclose also, that they have an autism diagnosis. But you may feel like I have the signs, as I say, and I don't want to overcomplicate things, because one of the things that I have is being too analytical, but sorry about that. It's a different variety of topics that they call about. And I have this autistic adult that was feeling depressed, because nobody understands that, and this autistic adult said, and I'm not making it up or anything, said, I wish I can find a cure to know to cure what I'm going through. No, I talked to him and say, I understand it's difficult, but I shared with him all the information and supports that can help him as well and

Andrew M. Komarow

You didn't give them access to the super secret cure that Autism Speaks is working on in the back side, you know, office, you know, hidden underground.

Tony Hernandez

No, I just providing that support and our resource to tell them that, hey, we're here to support. And I credit the customer service experience that I had for 10 years, because it learned me to deal with tough situations, especially as a manager during COVID. I never stopped working during COVID that I had to deal with tough situations. So I think the experiences of life have helped me to imperfections. Of course, I'm not saying I'm perfect, I'm not, but to learn to work with those, whether it's autistic individuals, families, work with the different perspectives, differences of opinion, and the different situations towards one goal, quality of life. I always say that quality of life, because that's the that's what our mission as a community should be, in my opinion.

Eileen Lamb

I just I just wrote a on our article about Autism Speaks. From my own perspective, I work

Andrew M. Komarow

Eileen, we're recording I don't think we've ever announced that you work for Autism Speaks yet on our podcast, right? But you've got a job. I mean, I don't think we have. So everyone, Eileen got a job working for Autism Speaks about a year into our podcast.

Eileen Lamb

You know, it's not secret anymore anyway, because I wrote a blog post about

Tony Hernandez

Yeah, and not alot of people knew that I was with Autism Speaks until recently, they posted the Upworthy,

Andrew M. Komarow

We're gonna ask you about the Upworthy. So just hold on a minute. Okay, let Eileen finish.

Eileen Lamb

Yeah, I posted an article about Autism Speak just before we hopped on for this podcast. And one of my points was that I love Autism Speak because that's amazing hotline. The response team, and I, you know, I posted about it, and people are like, didn't know about it already. And I think that's something that would benefit so many families, like often people come to me after diagnosis, hey, I don't know what to do, who to talk to. And now I'm so glad that I know, to tell them, hey, just contact The Art Team at Autism Speaks. Anyway, let's talk about that, of course, the article. So you did a collaboration with Upworthy and they posted it on social media. And the comments were not very kind. Let's just say this does it affect you to read those comments or what is it like for you?

Tony Hernandez

It affected me. I'm not gonna lie, but I shouldn't I, you know, I was not surprised, because I can understand. There's so many, you know, I can understand, I'm trying to understand the different

points of view from this groups, you know, that are that they take autism as an identity. And some people and I tried to understand the different points of view. Some people don't understand it, some people don't know that I have worked for the community, almost 10 years before Autism Speaks. So this is not my first time, you know, doing autism work. I've been doing it for almost 10 years. I have also written a book before Autism Speaks, I have different things before Autism Speaks. I think that's one of the unfortunately, it's very sad, really, that we still have this issues, to be honest. Because, you know, it can be compared to what a vision that they had in the past. And, and that divide is no different than the divide that we're seeing. Am I may sound controversial right now. But that's the way I see it, you're no better than the vision that you fight against the previous vision of organization before. So we had to let go. You know, as I said, autistics, we have people that say they speak for all of us, that's not true. You only speak for yourself, I had to learn carefully also in terms of anguish, because I had to be said, Okay, I what I do is I raised awareness of our costs, or autism, the good and the bad, the inspirational stories, but the difficult stories, because it's an autism world is a world of differences of opinion. Well, I have always believed, and that's the reason I don't lose hope. I've always believed that we have more in common than what they were more, we have more things in common that the things that divide us. And if we work together, the different groups within our autism community, we can achieve better things and I believe that we will be in a better place than the place that we are right now. In terms of autism. So that's the key is that, hey, you know, people are not going to agree with my decision that I work for Autism Speaks, and I can respect their opinion. But the one thing that we need to stop is this calling, this bullying, this hate speech that I see from different people. I'm not going to name the people. But we need to work together as what the mission should be about quality of life. Simple as that.

Andrew M. Komarow

How do you feel about the current autistic representation on television? And I know that seems like a loaded question. But to break it down with a bit more specificity for you. What is your favorite representation of autism and television? You can include movies or, you know, video entertainment industry? And also if you could share what is your least favorite? And why?

Tony Hernandez

It's so difficult, because I can obviously I can include myself, because I've been on television. But I think that one of the most best episodes that I've watched on television was "Dating on the Spectrum," the Australian dating program that has a different autistic people on the spectrum. I think that that's the name correct, "Dating on the Spectrum"?

Andrew M. Komarow

I think you are correct. What did you like most about that episode?

Tony Hernandez

It showed the different things that are realistic in terms of the challenges that people in the, autistics people on the spectrum have in regards to dating in regards to relationship. And for me watching those episodes was difficult for me to watch, because I've always had, and I still have a challenge with

relationships. It may not sound we you know, it may sound weird for others, but I've never been in a full relationship. So this has been an area that people might say, oh, you're a success story. You've done this, that and I can understand, but I have things that I'm struggling with. And I've struggled with since then, and I'm gonna make it I'm not saying that for sympathy or with I'm just saying what I'm going through and what my connection to that TV program. So because I felt connected to that TV program. I don't know if that makes sense.

Andrew M. Komarow

It does. Aren't they doing a US version of the TV program now? Have you auditioned yet?

Tony Hernandez

I didn't knew about it. Well, I heard about it. But I've been so busy with so many things. Probably I miss it. So I'm going to find it once I have a chance to finish the podcast. But yeah, that's my favorite presentation. And my least to be honest, and with all due respect, is the ones that which sometimes they show the superpowers when you know where there's the, and I am not saying that they are bad shows but lets say "The Good Doctor," for example, again, no, it's the same. They just represent one autistic story. We had to realize that autism is a spectrum. But I got asked about again, we had to make sure and I'd like to see more. I know we have a friend that is working on this as a consultant Dr. Kerry Magro who was a mentor of mine. He's more into this than I am but we need to continue to create more inclusion for all, the entire spectrum, and I think that hopefully we can continue to work on that as the years move on.

Eileen Lamb

Can we do you know the statistic for the the ART, ART by any chance? Any statistics you can tell us about?

Tony Hernandez

That statistic, those statistics for what, specifically?

Andrew M. Komarow

For The Autism Response Team, there's, we're actually we've decided we actually think it would be a good thing to promote. So like, I know, there's some statistics on like, how many calls are field? I think there was a nice graphic to that I've seen before, do you have those off the top of your head? Because if you do that, Eileen will just ask you that question. Right, Eileen? Because we probably want to share that and piss off Actually Autistic a bit. Okay.

Tony Hernandez

No, I don't have it in my numbers. Exactly. I know that there has been an increase in terms of the percentage of autistic people that you know, autistic people call in The ART Team, there have been a percentage. Right now, it's in double digits, like eleven percent, I believe it was, obviously, they call or one of the statistics is that a lot of people call for support for resources. One of the areas that I call also very often is for employment, which is a big challenge in our community, employment, business,

entrepreneurship, also calls for transition as well. Also, in terms of the diagnosis as well, not we have received an increase call of adults calling for it to get any information for a diagnosis, that's been an increase on that, because I have this person so much my child is on the spectrum was recently diagnosed, but I got I'm feeling with all the symptoms that may also be on the spectrum. And that has been an increase on those calls as well. Obviously, the language as there has been an evolution in terms of the language that the years go by, in terms of more acceptance, more, none in the negative tone of autism, but to be more neutral focus language to make sure that we're including everybody. And, and I think I don't know if you know, but that's some of the trends and statistics that they have been, we also have been obviously, and I'm gonna, I want I'm very proud to, to mention this, because I'm bilingual. My second language is Spanish, there have been an increase in terms of the numbers of Spanish calls and emails to our team, we have different bilingual associates in our team. And we have received calls, especially in you know, emails from different countries, especially in Latin America. So we have had, we have, you know, increase our approach to the Hispanic community. And I'm very proud to be part of that approach. So hopefully, that answers that question. And we're a team of couple people.

Andrew M. Komarow

A team of a couple people help 86,000 people, and how much did you charge them for the help that you provided?

Tony Hernandez

No, we don't charge them, we do it out of love and care, to help our people and our community, because there's another need out there. And our goal is to be, again, to be that person to provide that support. A lot of times, it's not easy, because we're not Superman, or Wonder Woman. But our goal is to be able to do the best of our ability, despite the challenges, despite everything, to be able to provide that support to families, autistic individuals in our society.

Eileen Lamb

Awesome. I know you guys were only two. That's pretty impressive. And you just mentioned that you're bilingual. I'm bilingual too. So as someone who also speaks another language, can you tell us any struggle, or differences growing up bilingual and autistic?

Tony Hernandez

Well, because I was born and raised in Puerto Rico, which is probably most of people there speak Spanish. I was able to learn English very well. Early my age, you know, our early through my childhood, my mom the way I obviously the school helped me a little bit, but the way that really helped me was my mom put English television. She put Cartoon Network back then when he was you know, at the top of the 90s, she put wrestling she put Star Wars I'm a big Star Wars fan. That's one of my hobbies.

Andrew M. Komarow

Yeah, Eileen, have you seen Star Wars yet? (all laugh) Eileen has never seen Star Wars.

Eileen Lamb

Working on it.

Andrew M. Komarow

Working on it? You go to Netflix. Disney+ you hit watch Star Wars and then we are. Come on Eileen.

Tony Hernandez

I think I'm gonna let you pass, Eileen. Usually I don't I'm

Andrew M. Komarow

I'm not gonna let her pass. I'm gonna keep I'm gonna keep bothering the crap out of her about this one. It's all about. We're recording this in the beginning of May. So of course, May 4 is coming up, Eileen I mean,

Eileen Lamb

I can watch it on May 4th, that will be so meaningful and I would always remember when I watched it?

Andrew M. Komarow

Exactly. Yeah.

Tony Hernandez

My connection with Star Wars is been with me since age six. By going back to the question on English, that's what I learned. Because I'm able to watch English television in my, in my household, and also through and also my hobbies helped me also video games wrestling when I'm when he was good a long, long, long time ago in my opinion, and Star Wars for me when it was good when he was a long time ago. But I've been to Star Wars conventions, I have met different actors and actresses I took pictures from with Mark Hamill. I took pictures with Carrie Fisher a year before she passed away. For me, for me that was like, because for me, so we can always be challenged, I had hobbies. And for me, they were not only hobbies, for me, that was me going into my own world. And to be able to do this, you know, to Star Wars, the conventions, and everything for me was a dream. And those are one of the best moments I had in my life. So I would never forget.

Eileen Lamb

You're really selling Star Wars. That's something

Andrew M. Komarow

You got to watch it two days.

Tony Hernandez

You had to you have to live you had to not only watch it, you had to live it.

Eileen Lamb

Oh, they're like six or seven movies now. No,

Andrew M. Komarow

Hold on, just like a ABA. I will give you a prize. And let's do one little step at a time, I will give you a \$5 Starbucks gift card for watching the first Star Wars but by first I mean a "New Hope, episode four. That's how everything works, right? Like bribing you to take small steps. That's how ABA works right? Now I imagine it works. Basically I'm bribing Eileen to watch Star Wars.

Eileen Lamb

You start at four?

Andrew M. Komarow

For what so well, okay, we'll talk later. It's a little complicated. It starts at it starts at four. Just, just go with it. Okay, well, I will explain to you later. And if anyone is just listening, that even I can notice the confusion on Eileen's face. It's that dramatic.

Tony Hernandez

So don't worry, I'm here to help as well.

Eileen Lamb

All right, Tony, tell us where we can find you on on social media if you want people to follow you.

Tony Hernandez

Sure, definitely. But before I go to that, I was finishing my story because I love to finish my story

Andrew M. Komarow

And your artistic and we won't be able to continue if we don't let you finish the story. So yeah.

Tony Hernandez

It's who I am. That's why it is so. But yes, I was able to graduate. I went back to school in 2013. I left college in 2011. I went back to college in 2013. After my year of working in the customer service, I went back to school, I graduated in the area of Business Information Management here in Florida, I was able to graduate with my bachelor's degree in accountancy information management in 2016. And for me, this was a very important moment of my life, because not only I graduated with my Magna Cum Laude Honors, 3.7, 3.76 GPA at that night. But also, I was recognized as an autistic college graduate by the college president at that time. And for me, that's very important, because not because of my story or special anything like that, because he became the confirmation of what has been, and it is my job today, which is to be that ambassador, that advocate for an entire community, and to demonstrate to our society, that people on the spectrum can achieve a better life. You know, regardless of the challenges in the in the struggle, so a lot of times they focus on that each person can achieve a better life. And that became my mission. You know, later on I graduated from college, I was

able to release my own book, both in English and Spanish bilingual book because there's not a lot of books about autistics in Spanish at the moment, and then later became a motivational speaker. And going back to the television question that you asked me early on, this came about in 2019, because I was promoting my book in Puerto Rico. And they invited me to talk on my book in the main channels, including Telemundo. And at that time, I didn't have many followers on social media, barely anybody knew about me. But for me, there are people that knew about me, but not a lot. And in within the first interview, after, you know, I gained like, 400 friend requests on Facebook, I never had even five friend requests at the same time. And I received 400. At the same time, it's amazing. And then I have interviews on and on. And then I was offered to be in the position of having my own TV segment at Univision, which I had for two years. And to work on television, I'm going to talk about I want to talk about this going through my work experience. It's not easy, you know, you had to adjust myself working within the timeframe because working on television, you know, it takes you know, it's fast pace, you only have a couple of minutes to do your TV show your TV segment. And I had to learn about that. And again, I didn't let the limitations control what I can and cannot do. But I was able to learn working on television and multitasking and unexpected. I was able to bring people that you know that I interview within the artistic community from around the world. I even brought Dr. Temple Grandin to my show. And I interviewed her almost a year ago, being the first and the only autistic Hispanic TV journalist to interview her on television and to this date. And I interviewed so many others and I started my podcast right now. So again In my one mission, one message that I want to leave before we end is, is again, we had to eat, help each person on the spectrum achieve a better life given the opportunity. Again, just because they have the challenges does not mean they can do something that was always believed. And hopefully we can, people that were watching this podcast can take that away from our conversation that we can create a better world for people on the spectrum and their families.

Eileen Lamb

That was perfect, great way to wrap this up. Well, actually, one more thing. I'm going to ask you some quickfire questions. So you tell me just first thing that comes to your mind. Yeah, it's like quickfire questions?

Tony Hernandez

Sure.

Eileen Lamb

First question.

Andrew M. Komarow

Eileen, I've never told you I have a sensory issue with snapping fingers.

Eileen Lamb

No.

Andrew M. Komarow

So that's something you don't tell people because then they just bully you. And then they just snap them all the time. So it's like one like, I usually just like cringe and let it go. But,

Eileen Lamb

I just did it twice in a row.

Andrew M. Komarow

Thank you. You're such a great friend, Eileen, I really appreciate that. Is this what they teach you like in ABA to like, you know, just like what people and like surroundings that are painful and uncomfortable? Because I give you a hard time.

Eileen Lamb

I actually had forgotten when I did the second time (all laugh)

Tony Hernandez

I want to mentioned something I want to mention about the therapies. Also, one thing before we end sorry. Again, I don't make a specific recommendation of a therapy. I have people that I respect and I admire in ABA therapy. And, again, there's a debate in regards to that we understand. But I always say look at working with an individual. ABA may work for that person or may not we don't know. Again, the most important thing is to be resourceful. And I'm talking to now parents specifically to be resourceful and be proactive and never give up and not let because none of that the negative voices take you away from that mission. Thank you.

Eileen Lamb

We almost made it one full episode without talking about ABA,

Tony Hernandez

The fire questions?

Eileen Lamb

Quickfire questions. First question, what is your favorite food or drink?

Tony Hernandez

Oh my God, that's difficult. I go Hispanic, Purto Rican food.

Eileen Lamb

If you could be any animal fictional or real, what would you choose? And why?

Tony Hernandez

Any character?

Eileen Lamb

Animal like a dog, cat, lion?

Tony Hernandez

Dog.

Eileen Lamb

What is your favorite Star Wars movie?

Tony Hernandez

Oh my god. Really? Okay, I changed that answer every year. So not always. I'll go with, I still had to go with three. Because that's the best movies. I don't care what other people say. That was for me the Star Wars best Star Wars movie, Palpatine was awesome in that movie. So you know, you need to watch it.

Eileen Lamb

I'm sure you're right. Do you have any favorite quotes or saying if so what it is and who said is?

Tony Hernandez

The quotes sometimes I'm not good at remembering quotes. Never give up. You know, like it's never give up. Never surrender. That's from who was it? Forget it. But never give up. Never surrender. That's it.

Eileen Lamb

That's That's good. What's Uh, okay. What is your favorite autism symbol is the puzzle piece, the infinity loop? Something else?

Tony Hernandez

Oh, wow. The symbol. You know what? I don't go by no symbol. What if it is puzzles or rainbows for me are always fine.

Eileen Lamb

Awesome. Well, Tony, thank you so much for coming on our podcast today was great speaking with you.

Tony Hernandez

Yeah, definitely. If you want to follow me on my social medias, and also my podcasts. My podcast is "My time with Tony Hernandez Pumarejo," bilingual podcasts in English and Spanish. If you want to learn more about my work, go to my website, TonyHernandezPumarejo.com. And also you can follow me on Instagram or Facebook, on YouTube, and other platforms. I'm here available here to help make the difference. And I really appreciate all of you for giving me the opportunity to be here.

Eileen Lamb

What's your handle on social media?

Tony Hernandez

It's at Tony underscore, Hernandez underscore Pumarejo. At Instagram, or if they can find me under Tony Hernandez Pumarejo on the Instagram search. They'll find me.

Eileen Lamb

Cool. Thank you.

Tony Hernandez

Thank you so much.

Andrew M. Komarow

Bye!