

Eileen Lamb 06:56:58

Welcome to "Adulthood on the Spectrum." In this podcast, we want to highlight the real voices of autistic adults, not just inspirational stories, but people like us talking about their day to day life. Basically, we want to give a voice to a variety of autistic people. I'm Eileen Lamb, an autistic author and photographer and I co-host this podcast with Andrew. Hi, Andrew.

Andrew M. Komarow 06:57:19

Hey, Eileen. Today, our guest is Austin Varco. Austin is a 23 year old racecar driver from San Diego, California, when he was diagnosed with level one autism at age 20. His purpose realigned to learning and understanding himself and act as a bridge for others understanding autism. Austin is using his racing career as a platform to educate and advocate for those who may not have a voice, but have things to say. Austin loves snowboarding, surfing, and being one with nature. He's a huge Larry David fan. Loves every thing music from Johnny Cash to Tool, big movie buff, went to USC for film production and transition to business for his degree. Welcome, Austin.

Austin Varco 06:58:00

Hey, thank you guys, for having me.

Andrew M. Komarow 06:58:02

Thank you for coming. So we like to ask all of our guests what identity language they prefer. We don't mean pronouns, although you can share those too. We mean, person with first person with autism? On the spectrum? Autistic? Do you have a preference?

Austin Varco 06:58:21

No preference. I kind of go by anything.

Eileen Lamb 06:58:24

Great. That's how we feel. So you were diagnosed with autism at age 20? Can you take us through that journey? What made you want to get assessed and how was that process all of that.

Austin Varco 06:58:37

So I was as a as a baby I was showing. Or when I was really, really young, I was showing some signs of autism, that my parents knew about right off the bat. And, as far as I understand that, there were some conversations that, that I should get a diagnosis, I remember, a doctor at one point was saying that, and they ended up not pursuing that, and kind of opting for just a different form of treatment. So my parents were very, not gonna say anti-label, but I think that they thought that more of a burden than a helping tool. And I, you know, as I've grown up, I've, I've kind of realized the benefit of that, especially, because I think that there were things that maybe I wouldn't have done, or chased after, if I, if I thought from a really young age that I was different, in, in maybe negative ways, or at least, that's how I would have perceived it. And so as an adult, I can definitely see the benefit of how they went about it. But, you know, when I, when I was 20, and kind of decided to go figure myself out. That was after years and years of just a deep depression, and, and just not getting anything from anybody. And so it was just, it was a hard time in my life, the five or six years before that. So my entire adolescence was rough. But I kind of never understood why. Until, till I got the diagnosis that made a lot of sense,

especially when I started looking into what it actually was. Because I didn't know. When I when I was diagnosed with autism, it was one of those things where I had been sort of researching what some of the symptoms were and, and a lot of it aligned with what I already had, right. And I was diagnosed before that with social anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and ADHD, and depression. And so that's kind of we were talking about the puzzle piece that was kind of, for me, I had these all these different pieces, but they didn't fit in the right shape. And so when I, when I got diagnosed, it was several days of testing, and they talked to my friends and my parents filled out all kinds of stuff. And they tested me for everything in the book. And when I finally got it, I was a little bit shocked, to be honest. I mean, I didn't really know what to think, because it made a lot of sense. But at the same time, I had only ever heard of the stereotypes. And I didn't feel like I fit the stereotype. And then I learned that, you know, everybody's case is different. And you've met one person with autism, right? That's what they say? Well, I think that to be really true. And I think it was right then when I, when I started having access to the tools that I think I should have had access to as a kid. I think that's, that's the only thing I would change. Maybe growing up growing up without a label was great. But I also didn't have access to the right kinds of therapy. I didn't have access to the right kinds of tools that I would have needed to do better in school, and that kind of stuff. And so I think had I had access to those a little bit earlier, even without a diagnosis. I may have had a better growing up, but it's just yeah. You having to learn.

Andrew M. Komarow 07:01:46

Can you elaborate a little bit more on what specifically and getting an official diagnosis how that helped you afterwards?

Austin Varco 07:01:54

Sure. Yeah.

Andrew M. Komarow 07:01:56

Maybe some like specific examples too.

Austin Varco 07:01:58

I think having an official diagnosis. So, if I didn't go after the official diagnosis, I don't think I ever would have been concrete in my understanding of what, what I was dealing with. And so because of that, I don't think I ever would have gotten the same help that I got after getting a diagnosis. So that would be the first thing. The second thing was, I found a huge sense of community. When I was diagnosed, for kind of the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged with a group of people. And that really showed last year at the Autism Speaks Walk. Because that was just like, it was like 5000 people that I know are kind of like me. And I felt like I fit in somewhere, which was really cool.

Eileen Lamb 07:02:46

I love that, you know, I think that was the biggest thing after my diagnosis, too. I always felt like something was wrong with me that I didn't belong. And I had one regret when I was diagnosis that it didn't happen when I was a child, because it would have helped me so much to understand why I was different, why kids were like, making fun of me and all of that, that I didn't understand. So I can relate to

to what you were saying. What would you say your biggest struggles with autism are? And also any strengths, anything positive that come with your diagnosis?

Austin Varco 07:03:17

Yeah, I feel like that. It's one of those things where you hear these stories about people who have crazy strength because of it. And like really good with numbers or, or something really specific. I think I have relative strength in things like if I get hyper focused on something, I can work on it for like two days straight. And I don't have to worry about eating or drinking or anything. And sometimes that's nice. But then the flip side of that is just the burnout. I think I have really have a problem with that, where I'll get hung up on something, and kind of dedicate every second to it. And then I just, it just gets thrown away and I feel sick. Like it's just it's just something that I deal with. Not every week, but but kind of all the time, I'll get really into something specific, and then it just doesn't exist anymore. And I move on to the next thing. And that's an exhausting process. Because I'll go several days completely demotivated when I give up on that. That's a problem. Yeah, so most people don't expect the racecar driver to have sensory issues, because it's pretty sensory intensive sport. But one thing that I found about myself, and I've known this my whole life, but one thing that that was, was really abundantly clear, after I got my diagnosis and learning about sensory problems was things that you would normally expect me to have a sensory problem with, I don't. So like I can go to massive parties, and be with 1000 people, because there's like a, for me, I need that, like I had, there's a certain threshold of sensory that I need to have in my life. So being in a racecar satisfies that. And I like you just constant barrage of everything all at once. And then I get really hungover from it. The next couple days, like I just exhausted, don't want to leave, I have to be in a dark space. Like all that. It's just something I've noticed. But then on the flip side, if I'm in a restaurant with like, two couples, and it's just like us, three people in that building. That's extremely overwhelming for me, being in a space where I can hear five or six different conversations all at once. Classrooms, overwhelming. That kind of stuff. It's it's a, it's just something I've noticed about myself. And those are the days the days that I have to sit in a place that's like, kind of quiet, but not entirely quiet are the days that I'm like, just burned out and, and kind of don't want to deal with anybody or anything.

Eileen Lamb 07:05:44

Yeah, yeah. I've never met an autistic person who was fine with parties. I mean, I'm like the opposite. I could not be like, among a lot of people. It's funny because you say you have social anxiety. So I feel like parties, social anxiety that would be hell.

Austin Varco 07:05:59

I feel like for from what I've learned about it is it's more about having one thing to focus on. So I find that like, the anxiety kind of goes away when I can focus on one thing. So if I'm in a big party with a lot of people, chances are there's live music or something. And so I'm focusing on just the one source, just the music, just the whatever. And I become more like in my own space. Whereas if I were at at a less crowded party, per se, where there's all these conversations happening, and that's kind of the primary thing, that's where I start to get pretty in my own head and and fall apart more or less. And so that's something I've learned about myself I also have I've always been really sensitive to like texture and food. And so I have like on my, my weekly food list of stuff that I eat, there's like fourth things. Like I

survive only on chicken nuggets, cereal, a couple of different fruits, and maybe a bowl of ice cream, anything else and I'm like, I won't touch it, it takes a lot of will to go out and chase those things.

Andrew M. Komarow 07:07:12

Speaking about will and chasing things, can you share some tools that have helped with your executive functioning?

Austin Varco 07:07:22

That was the big one for me was when I had tools to, to function daily, that was a, that was a huge improvement in my life and the tools that I use. I'm still figuring it out every day. And I'm working on it all the time, I have an occupational therapist now, which I didn't have before, which made a really big difference in my life, because she actually gives me action steps. And I didn't really have like, there wasn't a lot emotionally I was working through, at least in the last few years. And I didn't realize how much of my mental well being stemmed from like, all the stuff you don't think about. I think that was a big thing. So for me having an OT was was a big change in my life. And then she's given me a ton of tools like ways that I calendar and schedule. I have a problem with double booking, as you guys might have seen, and so I'm still working at it, but I'm way better than I used to be. In terms of like, how I reach out to people and how I interact with my schedule and all those things. Like I have three different calendars, I have a system of calendars that I use, and varying importance. So like my big calendar, I see big events where I'm going to be different places. And then like that's different race weekends, and then you shrink it down to a weekly calendar, where I start to block out my time. And then you have your daily calendar. And I'm sort of faith, I used to be really stringent on how I set up my day on the daily and I'm starting to kind of throw that away and think more big picture. And that's made a big difference in in, in my ability to communicate with other people and block my time.

Eileen Lamb 07:09:14

So Austin, I want to talk a little bit about racing. Yeah, I grew up in France, as you can hear from my accent and F1 is big there. And I watched with my dad and it was just you know, I feel like in Europe in general. It's a it's a big thing. And then I moved to America, and it seemed like pretty much nobody was into F1, until that Netflix show "Drive to Survive." So do you want to tell people a little bit I mean, the difference between like what you do and F1. And you know, the different type of racing there is out there.

Austin Varco 07:09:50

Yeah, so I do, I do sports car racing. So this would be there's a lot of different types of sports car racing. You know, you can have your GTs. Those are like your Ferraris and Lamborghinis with big wings and closed cockpits. And then it can that can go all the way down to sports car racing can bump up against stock car racing, which is like NASCAR, right? So you have these big burly muscle cars. But still closed cockpit still have a roll cage all the nine yards. And then you've gotten those races on circuits like F1. So it's right and left turns. But NASCAR stock cars started on ovals. So primarily NASCAR is ovals. And then they have some road courses shoved in there. So they race on some of the F1 circuits. And then you've got open wheel cars, and that's your F1, your IndyCar and that's the open cockpit, you know, no fenders, that kind of stuff. So I raced sports cars. And like I said, it bumps right up against doc cars. So the series I race and sees a lot of people moving up to professional stock

cars like NASCAR. They see people also moving up to sports car racing, because it's kind of the same skill sets, whether you're on an oval or road course. But one thing I want to mention is about the Netflix documentary, "Drive to Survive," if you haven't seen it, it's an awesome show, does a great job of kind of showing what the inner workings of motorsport look like. But what I want to say about that is a rising tide raises all ships. And that documentary did a world of good for the sport, whether you can make an argument that it's not entirely realistic, and there's some dramatic, dramazation of how they tell the story, but the boom and in racing and the interest in racing, not just F1 has been massive, especially in the US and we needed it as an industry we needed that to survive. So that was that was a great step for the industry.

Andrew M. Komarow 07:12:01

At what age did you start racing? And not even just racing? There's a lot of people with autism who don't even learn to drive until later. Do you think it's ever too late to learn to drive or to did you see that one woman I think she passed her test after like, you know, 1000 failed attempts or something. So

Austin Varco 07:12:23

It's like Spongebob .

Andrew M. Komarow 07:12:25

Yeah,

Austin Varco 07:12:26

Finally passed his driving test. So I, I was fortunate to grow up in a family that raced amateur sports car racing, which is where I got my start. And so I grew up around it my whole life, I was kind of otherwise and maybe never would have found it. I mean, it's racing. It's not something that you like. It's not like baseball or football, where you can just go to a field and you see it getting played all the time. Racing, you have to kind of go out, at least in America, you have to go two hours out of the city to find a racetrack. And then maybe you can watch some racing. And it's not real common on TV other than NASCAR or IndyCar. So I was fortunate I was at the racetrack. Almost every weekend when I was a kid. They put me in a go kart when I was four. And I was competing, go-karting by the time I was seven. So I, I had a lot of years and a go-kart before I ever hopped behind the wheel of an actual car. And actually, the first time I drove a car was in a high performance setting. So I wasn't even on a public road, I was on a track before I even got my driver's license. So I had a lot of experience. I know that if I ever have kids one day, I'm definitely going to stick them in a go-kart before they ever get behind the wheel of actual car. Because I think like one thing that, you know, you can also make a conversation about autism with is spatial understanding. And, and then also the sensory effect of it, right? Because you're, I remember the first time I drove anything, and then every time I've stepped up to whatever's next, it's entirely overwhelming. So you go from one car that you're really used to. And then you drive another car, that maybe maybe it's even slower than the other car. But because it's a new setting, and you're surrounded by new stuff. That's pretty overwhelming. And so I think that, everyone, I think that it's something everybody could learn with enough practice, but it is pretty overwhelming. For most people. I think even even people without autism, you're like my, my girlfriend is just terrified to drive. So I think it's just, it's a human thing to be scared of piloting a 4000 pound piece of metal, that four times the speed that we can walk or run. And I think that's a perfectly natural feeling.

Eileen Lamb 07:14:56

Yeah, and you guys are in LA, right? Or in California where like, the highways are like insane, and it's a lot of traffic. So I'm sure it's even harder.

Austin Varco 07:15:05

Yeah, and I find a lot of I think it's probably safer driving on a racetrack than it is driving on the 405.

Eileen Lamb 07:15:12

Well, speaking of traveling, do you do a lot of traveling out of a car too right because with your your racing world?

Austin Varco 07:15:25

Yeah.

Eileen Lamb 07:15:25

Weren't you away recently, like, is this hard to travel a lot? Like do you have any coping strategies anxiety, what?

Austin Varco 07:15:34

I'm fortunate that I, living this life works for me because I always have to be doing something. I'm, I'm terrible at just being. I don't know what that comes from. But I have to always be moving, I'm a lot happier when I'm, when I'm in a new place all the time, I need that kind of stimulation. So for me, it works. But what does throw me off is when I get to that new place, I'm usually off by like a day, like I need a day to kind of adapt and figure out where I am, even if it's in the same time zone. And so I've kind of learned to adjust to that. So like, I have certain things that I always bring with me to those places. So for example, I always sleep on the same pillow. I bring that pillow everywhere. And so whether I'm in my bed at home, or sleeping on a hotel bed in Ohio, or whatever it is, I'm always I always kind of rooted with the same stuff. So I think variables like that, that if you can find something that kind of cements you to being home, your home is always moving, which is which is nice. I love to drive. So traveling, it's not really a problem. So I can do a six hour drive or whatever. And to me that's just like me time. But as far as traveling around, yeah, I think I like it a lot. We'll see if I say that at the end of this year, because I have 30 some odd race weekends. So I might be a little burnt out the end of it.

Eileen Lamb 07:17:13

Is it like a championship and kinda like in F1? And is the point system the same? Like, how is that different?

Austin Varco 07:17:22

Yeah, it's, it's exactly the same. So you know, your race finishes are important all season. In the series I race in, you have a throw away. So you have one race that if you really botch it, or you get in a crash, or the car does something wrong, you can kind of move on to the next one. But if you have two weekends like that it sets you back pretty far. So there's definitely some attrition in terms of how you have to run kind of a perfect season to win a championship. But, but yeah, so I'm running two

championships. Three, three championships this season. So it's, it's nine weekends per pretty much. But and all over the country. So this weekend, I'm in Ohio, racing with World Racing League, which is endurance racing. So that's eight hours a day, two days. I drive like a two hour stint in that. And then the more local racing, and this is this is more what I what I emphasize and how I do my awareness, like, for example, the series I run is called Spec Miata, and it's a Spec series. So all the cars are identical, which means that different from F1, which means that all of the drivers have an equal chance of winning, hypothetically. So it comes down to the driver who's driving and Spec Miata is arguably the most competitive class in the US for this type of racing. And so I'm fortunate to be backed by, by some sponsorship, that that helps me compete. And these races, they also I work with them to raise awareness for autism, and kind of educate through racing. And so the company I work with now is Special Needs Coffee. And they, they're based in LA. And we can get that stood up. And they they are entirely employing autistic individuals. So they're a mobile coffee stand. The owners are awesome. They own an ABA company as well. And so they're heavily involved in the space. But they use it as an opportunity to employ autistic people and allow them to kind of have a positive impact on that community. So they support me as well, which is, which is awesome. And I can't think of a better brand to represent in, in racing. My goal is NASCAR. And so I'd love to take a company like that, to that high level. And between us, I think we're looking at maybe next year, having that kind of opportunity. So I'm stoked.

Eileen Lamb 07:20:06

That's exciting. Wow, I'm rooting for you. And we can give them a shout out when we post the episode if they have Instagram, or just send tthe information.

Austin Varco 07:20:15

That would be cool.

Eileen Lamb 07:20:16

That's, that's awesome. I love that you're doing that.

Austin Varco 07:20:18

Yeah, yeah, they they're, they're awesome. And I run a program called called "Race for Autism", which I work with local charities. Most recently, I worked with NEXT for Autism Network, which is based there about 30 minutes out of one of the racetracks that is on our calendar in Bakersfield. So this is a local charity. And last year, we brought out 100 families to the racetrack. And they got to put like stickers on my racecar, they got to sit in it and take pictures. And I was signing autographs, it was really, really cool. And that event, that event, got some press and then Autism Speaks invited me to host the same event at their Walk. And so we kind of did a second time there, which was really neat. And now that programs evolved. And our first event this year is going to be at the end of April for Autism Awareness Month. Also with Current Autism Network, and it's way bigger now. So now it's not just me, there's 10 other drivers participating with different types of cars. We've got like a big barbecue, and they can still decorate my car with the stickers, and they can write on it. They get autographs from all these different drivers. There's a simulator challenge at this one. So I'm bringing out my racing sim and they'll get to compete against my lap, and the winner gets some free merch. All kinds of stuff. So I'm really excited. That's that's taking a lot of work to set up but it's 100% worth it.

Eileen Lamb 07:21:52

Do you do iRacing?

Austin Varco 07:21:54

I do and it's an excellent practice tool. I think like, if you can get really good on a sim, you'll be really fast, in reality. Which I think is, is a great thing for racing, because you're leveling the playing field. Because almost anyone can afford a basic simulator. I mean, you can, you can get a wheel and pedals for \$75, strap it to an office chair, get a bare bones PC for 400 bucks, and you're racing. And I think that's unheard of. Because previously racing, you had to like me, you had to be connected to it or just find yourself in the perfect situation to do it.

Eileen Lamb 07:22:34

Yeah, that's what you hear a lot about racing. The complaint is that it's only for rich people. You know, you have to be born into it to make it you know, people like in F1. Like most of them were like, born into it.

Austin Varco 07:22:49

Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's what's awesome about sim racing is it levels the playing field, because you're starting to see these people who, they never grew up with this. They've never been karting. And yet, they're just awesome on the simulator. And that has given them really good opportunities to go drive actual cars. So that's, I think it's great for the sport. It's also bringing a lot of people into amateur racing, which is great, because eventually those amateur racers find sponsorship and they can go and do the pro stuff. So yeah.

Eileen Lamb 07:23:25

Okay, I'm going to ask you some quickfire questions now. Basically, just some quick questions, and you tell me the first answer that comes to your mind. Okay.

Austin Varco 07:23:36

Yeah.

Eileen Lamb 07:23:37

Ready, what is your favorite f1 team from this year and your favorite driver?

Austin Varco 07:23:46

I'm gonna go Charles Leclerc. Ferrari.

Eileen Lamb 07:23:50

Yeah me too. Nice.

Austin Varco 07:23:51

Nice.

Eileen Lamb 07:23:52

What's your current car?

Austin Varco 07:23:55

Current car? I have a 2012 Toyota Prius C. Not what you expected, huh?

Eileen Lamb 07:24:04

What's your dream car?

Austin Varco 07:24:07

I'm gonna go with a also Ferrari. Ferrari 328 GTB

Eileen Lamb 07:24:14

What's your favorite movie?

Austin Varco 07:24:19

Almost Famous.

Eileen Lamb 07:24:22

Is glow in the dark a color?

Andrew M. Komarow 07:24:26

Like this Like this? If you can see it here.

Austin Varco 07:24:29

Like that's glow in the dark. Yeah, exactly. Okay. I'm gonna. Yeah, I'm gonna go yes, that's that's the color. Well, glow in the dark is definitely color.

Andrew M. Komarow 07:24:38

Thank you.

Eileen Lamb 07:24:42

Andrew thinks it is a color. And I don't think so. That's why we ask all our guests to settle this. Where can people find you on social media and you can tell us about your sponsor and all of that too.

Austin Varco 07:24:55

Yeah, you can find me at AustinVarco.com. Or @ AustinVarco. You can find my my program, Race for Autism at RaceForAutism.com. And then got to plug the sponsors like racing driver. So thank thankful for Special Needs Coffee, @ Special Needs Coffee for for helping me out and allowing me to do what I love to do. And then additionally Atoll odka, which is based in Florida, and they donate a lot of their proceeds to autism charities, so gotta say thank you to them. But yeah, that's that's where you can find us.

Eileen Lamb 07:25:33

Well, thank you so much for joining us today. I mean, I love talking racing and stuff. So I was,

Austin Varco 07:25:38

I thought you were gonna say you love vodka. And I'm like, yeah, that too.

Eileen Lamb 07:25:47

Yeah, thanks. Thank you for joining us. And hopefully we'll see you in NASCAR one of these days.