[THEME MUSIC]

**This is Autism Points of View by Autism Speaks**

**I’m Felipe Maya**

[THEME MUSIC]

**In this podcast series we cover topics important to the autism community. But we also like to feature individual stories because every person on the spectrum has a unique story.**

**In this episode, you’ll meet AJ Wargo. He’s a 20-year-old autistic man with a witty personality, a passion for writing fan fiction and a deep appreciation for family and close friends. AJ got his autism diagnosis just before his third birthday. He has always marched to the beat of his own drum, never letting his diagnosis get in the way of accomplishing any of the goals he set his mind to. Today, he’s transitioning into adulthood with the help of his family and his co-workers at his neighborhood ShopRite.**

**AJ:** My job at ShopRite is being a bagger. Basically, I stuff groceries in bags. When I first started ShopRite, I felt happy and ecstatic. I knew I was going to meet some nice people. It’s been going quite well, they’ve been quite nice people. My favorite part has been able to work for all of these people and understand what they’re like and all that.

**AJ’s mom Anne speaks candidly about her son’s journey and the importance of helping to set him up for a fulfilling and independent life ahead.**

**Anne**: AJ’s 20 now, almost 21, so 3 years ago we said AJ can’t sit around this house every weekend, he really does need to go & do something outside of this house because we were busy doing other things ourselves and our daughter was busy doing things so we went over to the ShopRite and asked if he could work there. And, he took a job as a bagger, a front line bagger, working right at the cash registers in the front of the store and that was 2 ½ years ago and he’s still there and he’s still part of the framework of the place and there are some employees that are really great with him and he loves them and trusts them and he feels comfortable going there. I do remember that first day when I dropped him off dressed with his autism pin and his autism tie and you know his autism bracelet and just trying to make sure that any customer who saw him would know – this is somebody who you know I gotta recognize might not treat me the same way that a typical employee there might treat me. So, I dropped him off and they said you can go Mom we got him you can go, and I thought these people don’t have any experience with ABA, these people don’t know what they’re doing. They’re not educators in autism. But, he rose to the occasion and did quite well and here it is all these years later. And, he’s still there and he’s happy there and I do think that by putting some of these badges on him it helps the general public to recognize that they might have to curb back their irritation or you know take a different look at the experience of walking through the grocery store then they might if they’d ended up in a different lane at the grocery store with a different cashier.

**Anne:** His experience working at ShopRite has done remarkable things for his confidence and he’s so proud of having his own paycheck and having his own cash. Yesterday he went to GameStop and bought himself a game and was so proud of himself for having done that. On his own, with his own money, with his buddies from the program that he attends during the week. He has developed friendships outside of my relationships with people and that’s been a great confidence booster for him. He runs into people that we know from church or from the neighborhood or from wandering around or even from repeat customers that come into the grocery store now. He’s got his own kind of following there. And so I think it’s been remarkable for him in terms of feeling a part of the community and feeling confident about who he is and that he is contributing. He’s purposeful.

**Here's Nico Sumas, a longtime friend of the family and the Co-President of Village Super Market – ShopRite.**

**Nico:** I know the Wargo Family from church. And one day Anne gave me a call and said, “I’m looking for a job for AJ, would you think ShopRite could be a home for him?” And I said, “absolutely we can definitely give it a try. I’m not sure if the environment would be a little too hustle-and-bustle, but I think it’s a nice family environment and I think he would do well here. And so about two and a half years ago that’s how it all started. I think he’s done tremendous. Just seeing him in the store when he’s not working, he’s like a celebrity. He knows everybody. He talks to everybody. People know who he is, which is a beautiful thing in the community. The associates have really done an amazing job in supporting him and getting to know him and basically being a mentor and a friend just like they would be with any other clerk. I can’t say enough about how great that makes our family feel.

**When AJ started working at shop rite as a bagger, he had to wear a tie so he decided to wear a colorful puzzle piece tie. He wanted his coworkers and customers to know about his autism so that they could better understand him.**

**Nico:** What I like to hear when I talk to Anne, is this becomes his Saturday go-to place. He may not go to the football game where other kids go, but he puts on his puzzle piece and comes to ShopRite and that’s his family, that’s his social event. I think it’s terrific to see and he’s a terrific part of our community.

**Gigi Harris is a co-worker of AJ’s and one of his closest friends at ShopRite. The two met when AJ was assigned to be a bagger at Gigi’s register. From there a budding friendship blossomed and the two have bonded over many topics, including a love for television and movies.**

**Gigi:** Well, what really drew me to AJ is “Little Shop of Horrors” – the movie. One day he was rehearsing a couple of lines from it, and that’s one of my favorite movies, so I started rehearsing back. And then from there he would come in with his little tablet and he would say “did you see the remake of it?” and we would kick it from there. And every day we would just be like, “suddenly Seymore.” At first, he just didn’t like to stand a lot, you know what I’m saying? He wanted to sit down. But once I talked to him like, “AJ, it’s a job.” You know, he started standing more. He started talking a lot more. He started going to each and every person to bag instead of just one person. He was very social. For Christmas, he gave me this pin and you know, It was something special to me because I didn’t know that AJ really adored me the way he did. I guess he sees that I treated him no different than anyone else, so it made him feel more comfortable to be around me and to speak to me. He came to me one day and he told me, if I could explain to someone about his special needs and that he does have a disability, which is what I did. I made it a point that they understand AJ. I let them know that AJ is truly special, not just special needs, but a special kind of guy. And you know, you have to have patience with those types of children or people. We all can get out of character sometimes, all of us. But with AJ, he is very understanding, you can talk to him, he understands just like anyone else. So that’s why for those who maybe didn’t understand at first, get a clearer picture now of who he is and what he stands for and that we dearly love him here – especially me.

**When Anne spoke about AJ’s autism, she talked about some of the early signs she noticed when he was a toddler.**

**Anne:** AJ was born in San Francisco on September 11, 1998. Which at the time was September 11th. Not a big deal. Three years later September 11th was a very big deal. It was his third birthday. I was in a play group when we first moved here and he was 6 months old when we started, maybe not even, and, I would say to the other mothers, there’s something weird, there’s something not right. I used to babysit all of the time, I was always with kids. I never ran into a kid who didn’t like me and want to please me. And, it’s not that he didn’t like me and want to please me – he just didn’t necessarily connect. When I said pick that up and bring that to me…if I said that to any of the other children in the playgroup, they would pick the crayon up and bring it to me. And, he would ignore me and run away. And, I kept saying there’s something weird, there’s something not right here. And finally just before his 3rd Birthday he was diagnosed. So, that was a pretty momentous time for us.

So, when AJ was first diagnosed…people didn’t know what that meant. People didn’t understand in the marketplace at large, kids with special needs, and kids who were difficult, and kids who would melt down in the grocery store line or run away from you in the middle of traffic in a parking lot. And, I had many people say to me – give him to me for a week. I could fix this. They would say you know, you probably spoil him too much and that’s why he behaves this way. And, oh my gosh, as a parent – it just kills you. Right? So, uh, I think that’s where Autism Speaks has done a phenomenal job of educating the world about what this is and how you can’t control your child in the same way that people with neurotypical children can do. And look I had a second child, so I know the difference in how that works out because she is typically developing.

**AJ:** Having autism basically means I had trouble growing up. As mom said, I often ignored instructions or did bad things. Heck, the first school I was in… I bit someone. I’ve improved even though I’ve bounced from school to school. Most school was more of a relaxation and not much of school at all, but I managed to settle at a place called the Forum School and spent the rest of my learning days there.

My family helps me by communicating with me and by doing other stuff and you know, just being nice and all that. Well, I may be a bit crazy at times, but I generally have the best in mind for people. We’re not as crazy as you think we are **-** All people with autism are different, but some more different than others.

**Thanks for listening to this episode of Autism Points of View. Make sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts to be the first to know about new episodes.**

**This episode was written by James Fitzpatrick and edited by Dax Schaffer with audio recording by Heidi Denke and original theme music by Dustin Gledhill.**

**I’m Felipe Maya, thanks for listening.**