

Autism Points of View Episode 15: Q&A with autistic lawyer, Haley Moss

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This is Autism Points of View by Autism Speaks

I'm Felipe Maya

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Before I get to our featured guest for this episode, I wanted to let you know about an exciting new initiative we've recently launched.

Autism Speaks, Best Buddies and Special Olympics in partnership with the Entertainment Industry Foundation have launched, Delivering Jobs.

Delivering Jobs is an inclusion campaign dedicated to creating pathways to one Million employment and leadership opportunities for autistic adults and those with intellectual and/or developmental differences by 2025.

Learn how you can support this important campaign at deliveringjobs.org.

For this episode, I spoke with Haley Moss, who made headlines in 2019 for her own employment journey, being dubbed the first openly autistic lawyer in Florida.

Haley is much more than that though, she is also an author, artist and autistic self-advocate.

I had the pleasure of speaking with her recently and I think you'll get a lot out of what she had to say, I know I did.

[PHONE RINGS]

Hi, is this Haley?

How do you feel about all this exposure that you've gotten since you've graduated and gotten your first job?

HALEY:

I feel like it's a complete honor and I'm grateful to have the platform but I also think that stories like mine shouldn't be news because I feel that it happens a lot with people with disabilities is whenever they achieve anything it's seen as news because the bar is set so low for what we can and can't do. I wish that it wasn't that way and I do hope that when we do have more openly autistic professionals and people getting jobs and achieving things that it isn't seen so much as news but that we are claiming our rightful place.

What have you heard from people in the autistic community like what impact has your story had on them?

HALEY:

I think that the impact that I've had on other autistic people is showing that it's OK to be exactly who you are in any space that you're in. If you have the privilege to be able to do so and I say that open I just think because I've always disclosed, if you do a Google search on me you would know anyway and not disclose disclosing would be lying. So for me I think it's really important to be open. And I think that that's the message that I want to portray as well is to let other people know that if you're able to be open it's OK and you will find your people.

So speaking about disclosure, so I know that that's a tricky question for people especially for job seekers on the spectrum whether to you know either on the resume or in their first interview or first phone call to disclose like hey I'm autistic you know what do you think about that question?

HALEY:

I think full disclosure is a matter of personal preference and also depends on your unique situation. For me it ends up happening in the resume because if I took disability and autism out of my resume it would probably look a little sparse and it would not be as interesting. I mean I can't put that I've written books I can't put that I've done any of those other stuff if I took autism out of the equation. That being said if I do leave some stuff on there, naturally I will get that curiosity. Oh why did you want to write about autism in middle school? And I can't just say that oh I have a brother or a sister or oh well this is just something that interests me because it's just not true. I'm an only child and it does interest me but it also interests me because it's my personal experiences. So for me disclosure is a very natural thing. I think it's having a conversation that is framed as positive. But I think getting into accommodations is a whole other can of worms that a whole other thing to unpack probably once you have an offer in hand.

At your current job at the law firm are you receiving any kind of accommodations or supports?

HALEY:

I think accommodation in terms of for formal accommodations I wouldn't say I am but I think in terms of more informal accommodations, I'm allowed to have my headphones in my work. Sometimes I take walks or do other things that kind of not feel as overwhelmed. And I also ask attorneys that I work with to somehow be able to break down information in a way that I won't get overwhelmed. So sometimes what'll happen is you'll get a lot of different steps to do something and then it's just a lot. So I'll ask, OK, how can I do this in a manageable way to chuck this. So instead of being told go a motion. I'll be like OK. If you tell me just go write a motion. I will sit there and stare at the screen. But he told me, Ok write the introduction part first or give

the background of the case first and then do this and then do that. It's a lot more manageable and then I can get it done in a way that makes sense for my brain to process.

I always ask autistic people that I've interviewed to just tell me about their autism because I know that everyone you know everyone's autism is different in how it impacts them both positively and maybe not as positively at times. So how would you describe your autism?

HALEY:

I think the best way to describe my autism is I wouldn't know who I would be without it. I don't think it's something like a fashion accessory that I carry. So that's why I don't say, "with autism," that's why I say "I'm autistic" because it's very much part of who I am. I think for me autism is one of my strengths. It's also probably why I'm creative, why I like to see things differently. And I think that the world needs that. When I first found out I was on the spectrum and I was nine I was told about the positives because most kids know their weaknesses anyway so I knew that I had trouble socially. I knew that certain things were hard for me and I still know that but I try not to focus too much on that. I'm not trying to undermine that autism is a disability because it absolutely is. It's just how you choose to look at the cards you've been dealt.

So the thing that I struggle a lot with our executive functioning so being able to start, stop, stay on task sometimes, prioritize things. I'll have to leave a lot of reminders and I live off of my calendar. I also struggle with a lot of independent living skills. So even though we've talked about how I'm a lawyer and I passed the bar exam, I don't know how to park my car. I can't make it make sense no matter how many times I try. So I do have a driver's license but I choose not to drive and also Miami is a really scary place to drive. Which is a whole other story. And I also struggle with a lot of the living on my own type stuff. So I live alone. I have a one bedroom apartment I absolutely love it but I struggle at keeping it clean.

Remembering to take my clothes out of the dryer so that I'll just sit there for five days. And now that I'm talking about this with you I have no idea at the close of my washer or dryer so it's things like that. It's mostly things that we don't think about or we think that are fairly mindless or not things that impede too much on our daily lives. But I see it not as that I don't want to clean my house or I don't want to take my clothes out of the laundry. It's just that I can't remember or I can't function in a way that makes sense sometimes and do it.

So I might want to clean my house but then I get overwhelmed thinking about all different things I have to do to make that happen like remembering which cleaners are for the countertops, which places to use the vacuum, when to mop and I have to do this and all of a sudden I get really overwhelmed and then I end up just popping on my bed.

I hope you do remember the ticket here your washing machine. Later after this call.

HALEY:

I also forgot to mention that something else that happens with my autism is also like sensory overload. It's tough but I'm sure we can probably touch on that in another context.

We can just touch on that now if that's OK? So what kind of sensory differences or issues do you face?

HALEY:

I feel like I'm a little bit hypersensitive to sound mostly - sound is my thing. So I really get overwhelmed with jazz music class and fluorescent lights because they hum and also because they're really really bright. Which is also why certain spaces are really difficult for me such as a traditional gym for instance or even being on stage sometimes is really hard because you can see the light and it's really blinding. So, I do think of things like that. I remember going to sporting events in college and I'd be at a basketball game and I would hear the squeaking of the players' shoes the entire game and I was like, I can't do this. I remember looking at the people I was with, like, I got to get out of here. So usually concerts things like that. My general thing is if it's loud and crowded it's probably too much.

Going back to some of your childhood. Could you tell me - I know you learned about autism at 9 years old but how old were you when you were diagnosed?

HALEY:

I was three years old. I was largely nonverbal. I got kicked out of pre-school. Or should I say I was kindly asked to leave. I struggled with making friends. The thing about pre-school was honestly, I didn't color inside the lines which is a little ironic given that I'm an artist. And I also didn't quite understand how to drink out of a cup. So one of the things that we think about with little kids is we think about them holding a cup and drinking the way that we do most days. And I learned how from my dog. So I would model after the dog and I'd be using my tongue trying to lap it up like my dog did. And that kind of was not very well accepted at pre-school.

Wow, so they kicked you out for that or asked you to leave for that?

HALEY:

Amongst other things. So I wasn't hitting the same milestones that the other kids were. I wasn't... I wasn't verbal either. So it was recommended that I get checked out, because there was definitely something else going on, and lo and behold I was diagnosed with autism.

So they basically just didn't know how to support or teach you at that time?

HALEY:

I think so. And I also like to remind people that the 90s was a different time. We didn't have this widespread awareness that we do today we didn't have one in fifty-nine children being diagnosed with autism. When I was little it was 1997, 1997 was not the Internet being what it is today, it was still a novel thing for the most part it was just a very different world and a very different understanding of autism than we have today.

Now I want to shift to just talking about some cultural things regarding autistic people. So, what do you think about the way that the media portrays autistic people? I mean you were just in all these news stories and everything and there's always you know inspirational stories and things coming out involving you know a lot of times autistic kids but sometimes you know adults. How do you think in general the media portrays autistic people?

HALEY:

I don't think it's very accurate. I think that's the way the media portrays people with disabilities very generally is very much on the same scale. It's that you're either someone to be pitied or you are an inspirational thing. There is no middle ground. And when you think about most people, there is a middle ground. And I think about this a lot. Disability or autism generally, people will often say to me that I'm an inspiration and I really appreciate the sentiment. And then I think, have I ever said to somebody without a disability that they're an inspiration. And the answer usually is no. And when I think about why somebody inspires me and I think about their drive, motivation and how they are resilient or persevered through something. So I always think being fired or being fired for the right reasons.

I think a lot of the news stories that we see especially involving autistic people are trying to inspire you for the wrong reasons because at least that's not your situation. At least you aren't that person and so often when you see these inspirational stories whether it's a young child or the captain of the football team taking somebody on the spectrum or with Down syndrome to prom. Think about who's being interviewed in those stories too. It's usually the caregiver, the high school quarterback. It's usually not the person with a disability and I feel like how we tell our stories and who tells our stories matters which is why after going viral I made a point for a piece for The Huffington Post because I got to tell my story I got to reclaim the narrative away from the...Once upon a time you were nonverbal and now you're a lawyer because that's not all of who I am.

My story is so much more layered and complex than that. And also what I'm trying to do with this platform goes beyond just maybe feeling inspired for two minutes of your day. I want to open a greater conversation about neurodiversity at work. I want the world to be more accepting. I want a seat at the table and feel included in every part of society. I want more and I hope that having a story like mine getting the attention that it did I'm able to do that. So I look at it as no matter how you got to me or heard from me I welcome you with open arms. Let's get the work done together though and I hope that's what inspires you

Oftentimes when we see people, usually parents, criticize these kind of inspiring success stories, quote unquote, like yours because their child has such different and difficult challenges that they may never be able to go to college they may never be able to you know hold a job, they may never be able to live and function even semi-independently. And so you know they, oftentimes is it kind of angers them that their child's challenges aren't being put out there. Aren't given a spotlight. So what do you think about their perspective?

HALEY:

I think their perspective is completely valid. But I also know that the work that people who do have these wonderful success stories matters too but I know that how I see my work is I have to be able to support and be able to uplift the voices of those who are further marginalized or have more complex needs than I do. And that's why I'm a proponent of neurodiversity because I think the world needs all kinds of mind a lot the greater good and acceptance will also mean that people who also have intellectual disabilities or people who do have more complex needs than I do will also be further uplifted. I think it's all about perspective. I see it as when one of us moves up, we all move up.

And maybe it will be one judgmental look in the grocery store. Because I know my parents got a lot of those look with me. I see it as, how are we able to uplift each other. And I think we need to talk about people who do have more complex need and intellectual disabilities as well because they are very much part of this community. It is not just those who were formerly diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. It's not just success stories from high achievers. Autism is not all STEM geniuses just like it's not all nonverbal. I think there is somewhere in the middle that everyone can agree on and we all want the same thing. We all want a world that is more accepting, understanding and giving opportunities to our children and adults.

I think parents also need to understand that it's important to be a part of this conversation but also make room for all voices at the table. So I think the autism conversation generally involves parents, professionals, autistic people, teachers, educators and experts of all kinds. I don't think it's a conversation that's meant to be dominated just by parents just by professionals or just by autistic people. I think all of us need to work together to have this more inclusive world and if sharing success stories is part of that narrative and part of that agenda to get a more inclusive world then I'm up for it. If we're doing it just to make people feel good about themselves or to think that at least I'm not on the spectrum then we're doing it wrong. But I think it's really all about perspective.

Some companies now are have like autistic hiring initiatives where they either seek out autistic candidates for jobs or they have programs in place if they know they have autistic employees or they know that they will be having autistic employees, they have programs in place that offer supports or different accommodations based on their specific needs. What do you think about this these companies that are rolling these initiatives out?

HALEY:

I think that it is very well intentioned and a great step in the right direction. I do think it's important to also include autistic people in the workforce to decide about accommodations or how to reach other people in the community not just our parents and how parents go, oh hey you should probably be getting a job. So I think it's really a broader conversation as well and working together. I really am excited and I wonder how these companies as well are supporting possible employees with intellectual disabilities or people who might not be in what these companies are known for. Because a lot of the companies that do autism work programs do happen to be in the STEM sphere. So I thought about this a lot in my own daily life.

Say, let's pretend that I wanted to quit my job right now which I don't because I love my job. So let's just pretend I did and I wanted to say I work at one of these big companies as corporate counsel, would I be given the same opportunities through a hiring initiative? Because I'm not going to be a data analyst or a financial analyst or an engineer because I want to be a lawyer at one of these companies. Are they making that same effort to recruit someone else, are they recruiting people from marketing departments or working at the coffee desks for any of these other roles in these big companies? I worry about that because there is no one skill set that all autistic people have. Every single person has different strengths and weaknesses. So I think it's important to be a well-rounded approach and also to make sure that autistic people are eventually involved in creating, designing, recruiting and interviewing for these positions as well. Because we know what it's like to be in a workforce that might not be accommodating. We know what it's like to have jobs that don't always respect us or jobs that we've loved and we want to share that job love with other people too. So I think it really needs a more comprehensive approach. But I feel it's an excellent step in the right direction.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Autism Points of View. Visit our website at autismspeaks.org/podcast to get resources related to this episode and to learn more about Haley.

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This episode was written and produced by me and edited by Dax Schaffer with original theme music by Dustin Gledhill. I'm Felipe Maya, thanks for listening.