

# A Person with Autism Finds his Voice

*Todd Washburne*

**BEFORE YOU READ:** Share what you know about autism. Read the box on p. 47 to learn more.

## Mute, Angry, and Frustrated

While I was a child until my late 30s, I could not communicate with anyone because my level of autism prevents me from speaking coherently. I make strange noises and body gestures that I cannot control. I was *mute*, angry, and frustrated. My parents sent me to a special school because the public schools considered me retarded, unreachable, unteachable, and uncontrollable. I learned nothing in school. I was just holding a pen. All the kids were there for different reasons. Teachers were not trained to help us. I eventually went to high school and then aged out. I soon learned there were not enough services for adults.

## I Found My Voice

Now I use a keyboard to communicate, and it has opened my life. I can focus my thoughts by looking only at the keyboard. It helps to have a *facilitator* with me. She touches my arm or shoulder, and this quiets the *turmoil* in my head. When I learned how to communicate this way, I was *ecstatic* that I found my voice. My life is now filled with conversations. I write stories and articles, many of which are collected in a book called, *My Random Thoughts and Feelings: Speaking Out from Autism*. And my poetry has been published in the local weekly paper, *The World*.

## Speaking Up for Myself and Others

I have had to speak up for myself or others on several occasions, and I have learned to defend myself against being treated rudely. For example, one day, I was putting away groceries at the local food pantry where I volunteer. Another volunteer came over and took my cart. I asked why she was



*Todd Washburne (with his mother) testifies at a hearing.*

taking it, but she never answered. She then started putting the groceries away. My facilitator always makes me speak up for myself, and so I did. This woman assumed that I was not capable of doing this very *minor* task. I told the woman that I was quite capable of doing this task, and I then took the cart back and put away the groceries.

Teachers at a local elementary school invited me to speak with them about working with children with autism. They asked for my advice about what to do with students when they act up. I shared a suggestion that works for me: when the child starts to act up, hold their hands and have them breathe in and count to four and then breathe out and count to four. This breathing exercise helps me focus my brain, and it quiets the noises in my head.

## Voting and Volunteering

I registered to vote at about age 40. The political news is now more important to me than ever before. I have learned a lot by voting, and I am

proud to have a say in how the government is run. In addition to voting, I have been involved in politics in other ways. I was a member of the Vermont Autism Task Force, which was created to inform the public about autism. I have attended legislative breakfasts in Montpelier to protest proposed cuts in spending for the disabled. I also went to the Barre mayor's office to discuss autism and the many needed services for autistic adults. I want to help educate the public and key government agencies about autism. I want to show them that autistic people are smart. I have also written to both President Obama and President Trump about climate change, services for the disabled, and many other national and international issues.

I like volunteering and speaking out for several reasons. I want to help people learn about autism. I am giving back to society, which provides me with medical and dental care and financial support that allows me a home and the means to hire people so that I can function in society. Now I am known as an intelligent adult who advocates for himself and others.

#### AFTER YOU READ:

1. Look at the words *mute*, *facilitator*, *turmoil*, *ecstatic*, and *minor*. Can you tell from the context what these words mean?
2. What are some of the ways Todd has used his voice to speak up for himself and others?
3. Share something that you find particularly surprising or interesting about Todd's story.
4. In this story, Todd explains how he *literally* and *figuratively* found his voice. Explain.

*Todd Washburne does not have a high school diploma due to a lack of educational opportunities afforded to autistic children when he was growing up. He has taught himself how to read, do math, and study history, and he avidly watches the news. He and his facilitator Gail go to the theater, listen to music, visit art galleries, and do many things in the community. He is a student at Central Vermont Adult Basic Education in Barre, VT.*



## What Is Autism?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. According to the Centers for Disease Control, autism affects an estimated 1 in 59 children in the United States today.

We know that there is not one autism but many subtypes, most influenced by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Because autism is a spectrum disorder, each person with autism has a distinct set of strengths and challenges. The ways in which people with autism learn, think and problem-solve can range from highly skilled to severely challenged. Some people with ASD may require significant support in their daily lives, while others may need less support and, in some cases, live entirely independently.

<[www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org)>