

Thomas Olrich: The man I am

A photo story of Asperger's Syndrome by Leah Nash



Thomas poses outside his apartment in the Pearl District with (right to left) his older sister Candice Kramer, her husband Jason Kramer, and their mother Cindy Taylor.



Thomas Olrich, 35, was diagnosed with Asperger's four years ago. He says he always knew he was different. "I knew something was up. I was always upset, always scared. Something was not clicking."

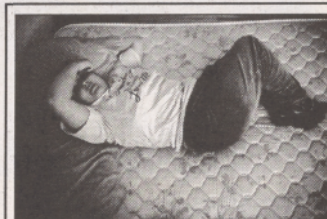
In his own words

Living with Asperger's is challenging. I have problems talking to people sometimes. Like when I'm trying to express myself it comes out wrong. I don't understand what people say to me. Like I don't pick up on verbal cues sometimes. I can't pick up on people's gestures. Like when I talk to people that are not paying attention to me. I talk to them anyways. When people are working hard, I don't understand that they can't give me full attention. Having Asperger's effects my social habits. My mood changes when I talk in social gatherings and I talk less. Having Asperger's, I feel very alone sometimes and always feel vulnerable. I

also feel ripped off. Asperger's throws me curve balls. It makes everyday normal tasks like speaking, learning, and understanding harder.

Asperger's upsets me, but I go a different route. I learn in steps and need structure to succeed. My family circle helps me find structure. My sister and brother-in-law helped me to become the successful man I am today. Having a job at Goodwill gives me structure, too. I also have really good medical care. My sweet pad in the Pearl is good for me, too! I'm bettering myself every day.

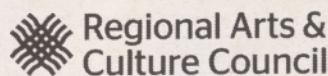
— Thomas Olrich



Part II: The comfort of acceptance

Anna Bauer has mixed feelings about her Asperger's, and she talks personally about her condition and society's response in a special photo essay compiled by Leah Nash. It's part two of this special five-part series that features both online and print installments. This and Part I in the series can be seen at www.streetroots.wordpress.com.

"Right now I appreciate who I am and having Asperger's makes me more special. It's great to be unique and creative, especially taking pleasure with scoreboards." — Anna Bauer



Regional Arts &
Culture Council

This is the third in a special series on five individuals with Asperger's Syndrome as told through the lens of photographer Leah Nash. The project was made possible in partnership with the Regional Arts & Culture Council in an effort to chronicle the diversity of this complex diagnosis of autism, illustrating the challenges and beauty of an unconventional life.

Photos on pages 8-9

About this project:

Autism is the fastest growing disability in the U.S. with an economic impact of more than \$90 billion. The Center for Disease Control reports that now one in 110 children are being classified with autism spectrum disorders, compared to one in 10,000 in the 1970s, and according to the Autism Society of Oregon, our state has one of the highest rates of autistic diagnoses in the country.

The objective of this series is to explore the diversity and complexity that exists across this spectrum, for it is often said that people with autism are like snowflakes — no two alike. This work is especially relevant given controversial revisions proposing to do away with the Asperger's diagnosis altogether in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the diagnostic encyclopedia of American psychiatry.

Leah Nash is a documentary photographer based in Portland. More of her work can be found at www.LeahNash.com.