

Teen: ‘It really opened my eyes up to what his struggles were’

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Without being able to communicate effectively like his classmates, she saw her son beginning to act out. An article on autism from his teacher helped Elly Henderson and her husband connect the dots. Her son had plenty to say, they learned, he just needed help with when and how to say it.

“It really opened my eyes up to what his struggles were,” she said. “I didn’t even realize it at all.”

After researching autism spectrum disorder more thoroughly, the family decided to transfer Sam to Cannon Beach Elementary School, which had more access to special-needs services and more structure than the private school.

But in many ways, Elly Henderson was starting from scratch. She was charged with getting a small school to understand the needs of her son while making sure he didn’t feel singled out.

“When he’s on the books as needing special education services, does that ever prevent him from anything?” Elly Henderson said she wondered at the time. “I want him to become president of the United States if he wants to. What does this really mean for his career and his life? It’s intimidating.”

It started with working with an autism specialist to develop an individualized education program. The plan was designed to take away the inherent barriers that inhibited Sam from learning in the same way as his classmates.

“It was pretty clear at Cannon Beach Elementary, because it was a really small setting, that not a lot of teachers had experienced it there,” she said. “I think 13, 14 years ago, we were just at the cusp of figuring out that these kids weren’t behavioral problems, that something was coming to the surface that was creating the behavior.”

He would do the same work. But when the rest of the class would sit in a circle and take turns



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Sam Henderson works on a computer at KMUN.

reading passages out of a book, Sam would be allowed to listen to a headset alone. Instead of receiving directions verbally, he would get them in writing so he could clearly understand the expectations.

He would be given extra time to do assignments. Not because he couldn’t do them, but because he would try to do them too comprehensively, a trait he still struggles with today.

“I have a perfectionist personality,” he said. “Put me into an environment such as tests, and I get really stressed about thinking of giving the best answer possible instead of just getting the assignment done. And that’s my greatest strength and greatest weakness I would say.”

Unexpected change

Henderson sees his accommodations as a double-edged sword. At points they were helpful. But they couldn’t do much to address some of the stigma he felt from his peers.

Around third grade, he recalls, his friends dared him to yell the word “hell” around the playground. Missing the joke, and not realizing “hell” was a bad word, he took on the dare, and ended up

getting in trouble.

“There were times I feel my deficiencies were taken advantage of,” he said.

Another struggle that was hard for Henderson to express was how difficult unexpected change was for him.

Take learning cursive, for example. For his peers, it was just another new topic.

For Henderson, it was an affront to common sense.

“I could never read it, and I always preferred (writing) to be as straightforward and readable as possible ... so I refused to use cursive,” he said.

In an attempt to compromise, his teacher suggested he write every other sentence in cursive. His solution was to write one, exceptionally long sentence.

“When they started catching on to me, I’d say ‘OK, here’s a sentence in cursive that’s like, 12 words long,’” he said. “I usually found my ways out of doing change, but it would make me feel absolutely terrible when I did have to actually adjust to something as sudden as that.”

As he entered middle school, Henderson began sensing a shift. Right out of the gate, it was more



Maya Dooley

Sam Henderson in a senior photo.

difficult to talk to people. For someone sensitive to excessive noise and crowds, there were few places more stressful than the hallways of a public school.

The friends he had made in elementary school became more distant. The rules of social interaction were changing, becoming more complicated and difficult for him to understand. He would get interrupted or talked over.

It’s when he started feeling more alone.

“I didn’t feel like I was important in my friends’ lives anymore,” he said. “Everyone was everyone’s friend except me.”

As a parent, it hurt to see Sam’s friends — and their parents — turn their backs on her son, Elly Henderson said.

“People would say, ‘Don’t worry, it will be a bigger setting, with tons of kids. The probability of making friends will be higher because there’s more people,’” Elly Henderson said. “It actually got harder.”

But it also marked a time of personal growth. He began to gain new talents and interests. He picked up the guitar. He started running cross-country. He joined the school choir and auditioned for a school play.

This happened in part because he really did enjoy all of these activities, and takes pride in being

well-rounded. It also became his method to connect with people in a way he understood.

“I don’t really feel comfortable in large, packed spaces,” Henderson said. “But I do feel comfortable being able to go up to someone and ask them a question ... I’ve tried my best to have those kind of connections with people.”

Slipping through the cracks

Elly Henderson is proud of how far her son has come, and is thankful for the people who helped him along the way.

But she also feels like most people have a lot to learn when it comes to understanding the realities of high-functioning autism. She hopes by talking about her experience publicly, more parents and children will resist rushing to judgment about Asperger’s syndrome.

“I think we need to make sure we are not letting kids who are in the high-functioning zone slip through the cracks,” Elly Henderson said.

As Sam prepares for college, he’s not entirely sure what to expect. He sees his condition as a blessing and a curse that he will always have to live with, but has a complicated relationship continuing any kind of accommodations.

“The major reason is because it’s not something that I earned. I take great pride in skills and accomplishments and traits that I’ve earned in my life through diligence and practice,” he said. “I want people to think of me as a skilled person because I’m a skilled person ... not because of (Asperger’s).”

He knows there are challenges in learning a whole new place with brand new social situations.

But there is one aspect of college he knows he’s excited about: the quiet streets of Salt Lake City.

“With the curfews out there, you can walk around the streets around 7 p.m. and barely anyone will be out,” Henderson said. “And I love it for that.”

Townhouse: Intent was always to create townhouses and sell units separately

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the property and the label “townhouse” is on everything. The Harns say there was never any discussion about building duplexes or creating a condominium plat. The intent was always to create townhouses and sell the units separately.

“When they issued the building permit to them, it was staff’s understanding that (the Harns) still had an interest in dividing these two units,” Estes said, adding, “I think everyone probably assumed that everyone was talking the same talk along the way. I think it was probably unclear when the building permit was issued which way they were going to go.”

But no one from the city crossed out “townhouse” and wrote in “duplex.” The only comment on a building permit issued in August is that “if townhomes will be in separate ownership, documentation for a (homeowners association) shall be submitted.”

“In hindsight, we should have scratched out ‘townhome’ and written ‘duplex,’” Estes said.

A snag

The Harns remember things differently.

The men have been building in Clatsop County for decades. They started out in Cannon Beach and worked their way north. The South Slope project was their first stab at building townhouses, inspired by a relative who had recently purchased a townhouse in Spokane, Washington, and loved her



Katie Frankowicz/The Daily Astorian

A two-unit townhouse in Astoria has turned into a problem for developers and the city.

new living quarters.

Townhouses appeared to be less arduous than building a condo, the Harns say. They were also potentially a better return on investment than building a single-family home.

They say they checked with the city before buying the property and again when they applied for permits. Later, their plumber checked with city engineering to make sure one sewer lateral was acceptable. At every turn, they say they were told, “Yes, it’s OK.”

“My guess is they probably should not have given us the permit for townhouses in the first place,” Corey Harn said. “I don’t know what happened there.”

When the units were listed for sale, there was even more interest from potential buyers than the Harns expected. One potential buyer is Kevin Leahy, the executive director

of Clatsop Economic Development Resources. When he went to do his due diligence with the city in February, the project hit a snag.

Leahy was given a list of things the Harns needed to do in order for a separate sale of the townhouse units to work. But Bob Harn said he was later told everything could proceed. A woman who bought the second unit had already put in her notice at her apartment.

“The next thing I know, I get the message from (Johnson in March), ‘You can’t sell them and these are all the things you need to do,’” Harn said.

Johnson detailed steps they would need to take to

create a condominium plat — a lengthy and expensive process. The Harns were already losing money on the project and were anxious for their buyers, especially the woman who wouldn’t have a place to live if the new unit was not available soon. They wanted another option.

Later, the city suggested they apply for a variance to the rule on minimum lot sizes. With a variance, the Harns could divide the single lot into two lots that were 4,000 square feet each instead of the usual 5,000.

The deadline for public input on their request falls later this month.

The Harns will also need to install a second sewer line, but the city has agreed to give them extra time to do the work to allow the sale of the units to proceed.

It’s not quite the conclusion the Harns would like, but at least it’s a conclusion.

“I’ve built pretty much all through the county and never experienced something like this,” Bob Harn said.

An opportunity

Mayor Bruce Jones, who met with Bob Harn in March, and Estes see the situation as a unique, one-off issue — the result of a misunderstanding or miscommunication.

Jones said he is satis-

fied that city staff provided information up front and tried to work with the Harns.

But the city leaders also see an opportunity to again discuss codes and zoning for housing development.

During his campaign last year and as mayor, Jones said Astoria needs to address housing issues by allowing more flexibility for different types of development, perhaps by permitting things like smaller minimum lot sizes, greater maximum lot coverage and examining height restrictions and setback requirements.

A draft Clatsop County housing study has made similar assertions about the need for housing diversity.

A presentation during a City Council work ses-

sion on affordable housing in 2016 outlined where townhouses and rowhouses are allowed — only in Mill Pond and some commercial zones — and where zoning could be opened up to allow more of this type of development.

Townhouses and rowhouses could be a less expensive alternative for people than, say, a larger detached house, the presentation noted.

The City Council discussed possible changes and ultimately rejected the proposals or put them on the back burner.

But, Jones said, “I do think that once we get the county housing study we need to look at some of those recommendations again.”



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