

My autism diagnosis was the best thing that ever happened to me'
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June Shannon



Brian Irwin, UCC student and AsIAm volunteer, says his diagnosis brought the supports that he needed. Photograph: Sean Daly

“Most of the time I feel that I do not understand the world. I feel a distance between me and what is going on in the world around me. I just want to scream and shout to the world about what I am truly feeling right now. I want the world to listen to me like they do with everyone else.” Joanne Weller, aged 21

“Society in general needs to be more understanding, adaptable and inclusive of people with autism. We need to be recognised for the enormous positives we can contribute, particularly in the workplace, rather than in the negative way we are perceived now.” Lara Smith, aged 20

These quotes from two young women with autism describe, in their own words, the struggle they and thousands of others face in a society that tends to focus only on their disabilities and not on their many and varied abilities. Lara Smith and Joanne Weller were speaking at the AsIAm National Conference, which took place in Dublin earlier this month.

Central to the Conference was highlighting the importance of recognising the positives that people with autism can bring to society and empowering them to reach their full potential.

AsIAm aims to provide a one-stop shop for the autism community in Ireland, including informing the public and those with autism about the condition, providing a platform for people with autism to share their stories and advocating for the concerns of the autism community.

According to Chief Executive Adam Harris, people with autism continue to face unnecessary barriers in all aspects of life. “Students with autism are twice as likely to be bullied as their peers, about 80 per cent of people with autism are long-term unemployed, and about one in three people with autism experiences mental health difficulties.”

However, Harris said that many of the obstacles facing people with autism could be removed and society needed to be organized in a way that no longer ignored their needs.

The theme of the Conference was “empowering potential” and nowhere was this more evident than in the talk by Dr Peter Vermeulen, world-renowned expert in the field of autism. According to Vermeulen, some common misconceptions about autism are that those with milder forms of the condition are happier than those with severe autism and that the more supports you give someone with autism the happier they are.

He said studies had shown that there was no link between IQ, severity of autism and quality of life, and the amount of support a person with autism receives does not predict quality of life.

University College Cork (UCC) student and AsIAm volunteer [Brian Irwin](#), Speaking at the Conference, Irwin said that being diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome at 21 was “the best thing” that ever happened to him.

Irwin articulately outlined his experience of struggling for 15 years through Primary and Secondary School before being diagnosed and said he simply believed his teachers when they told him he was “lazy” and “not working hard enough”.

“I got my diagnosis and [it was] the best thing that ever happened to me. It changed my life because I had believed everything I had been told. I believed that I was lazy; that I wasn’t going to achieve anything; that I was worthless; that I wasn’t going to be able to do anything in my life. And then it stopped being my fault.

“It was the fact that I had a disorder that I had to work around, and with the diagnosis came the supports that I needed.”