

From Autistic to Spirit-Filled Author: A Story of Advocacy

Autism advocate and author Ron Sandison humorously tells of the time, at age 7, when his speaking development was still so delayed. As his brother, Chuck, would introduce him, he would jokingly say, "I think my brother's from Norway." This was because of the strange sounds Ron would make.

One out of 59 children is diagnosed with autism every year, and three quarters of them are boys. As recently as the 1970s and 1980s, the number was 1 out of 2,000.

At the time that Ron's family learned he, too, was autistic in the early 1980s, there was not much practical help for these children.

Ron's speech, though developing normally for a while when he was a very young boy, began to regress at 18 months old, and for years he needed to work with speech therapists until he could talk clearly and well.

Now, he speaks in so many places, from conferences to classrooms. He teaches theology, works in the medical field and helps other families with autistic children, advocating for their acceptance and inclusion in society.

All this was made possible by loving parents; his mom, Janet, particularly, led by the Spirit, fought for a correct diagnosis of his challenges as he entered school. She gave up her work outside the home to focus on Ron and on the development of all his gifts, believing her son, despite his diagnosis, could excel.

Ron's life and faith testify to the remarkable capacity that

God has to make something beautiful out of every life. Though people may say, "this one will never make it or that one will not amount to anything," God says, "Look! I am making all things new. ... these words are faithful and true" (Rev. 21:5b).

Ron tells stories of many families overcoming the challenges of autism and of their beautiful and talented children being released to share their giftedness. God would have us know all things are possible with Him. (See Luke 1:37.)

There are different ways the church can help and surround families of autistic children with love and nurture. One primary way is by being supportive of education and information supplied to their communities. Another way is by providing mentors within their communities. Mentors can be remarkable bridges between the child with autism and the community, helping the children to integrate and gain the social skills they need to succeed.

Ron wrote in his book of an autistic young woman, Alexis Wineman, who was so helped to develop and bloom that she ended up winning the Miss Montana contest (first autistic contestant) and was in the Miss America contest. Following her win, in January of 2013, she was named by Diane Sawyer on World News Tonight as Sawyer's "Person of the Week."

Alexis uses her platform, now, to advocate for the inclusion and understanding of autistic people. Ron wrote that she says, "I will be successful if just one person encounters a child who is overstimulated without staring. If one teenager invites an 'outcast' to lunch or just smiles at him or her. Or if one employer gives a job to someone who might not be able to look the interviewer in the eye. ... We need to understand autism and help those with the condition to unlock the potential that lies within all of us."

To be inspired and moved by more of Ron Sandison's story and to learn how to advocate for autistic people, please listen to

this episode of *Rooted by the Stream* on the Charisma Podcast Network. {eoa}

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