

## **Taking Down the Veil: Seeing Autistic People for Who They Are and Can Become**

By Grayson Ponti, from Zoos and Aquariums for a Neurodiverse Ecosystem (ZANE)

When I was in school, some people assumed I was dumb because I talked funny. As an adult, sometimes people have written me off for being too honest, forthright, intense, quirky and knowing too much about things they don't expect me to. I would have hoped getting a bachelor's degree and soon a master's from prestigious colleges, a fulfilling career in zoos, being happily married and becoming an emerging leader in AZA would silence those critics but, even now that I have those things, the implicit biases and judgments occasionally come in. To quote Zora Neale Hurston, "Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me." While I am a true believer everyone is on the same spectrum and everyone's experiences are all different, I believe that sentiment resonates with most ASD people I know.

When asked how zoos and aquariums can be more inclusive to the ASD community, I always say it is part of a bigger conversation about being intentionally open in our eyes, hearts and minds to how we perceive other people and working past any potential bias or stereotypes we have. I like to compare it to taking down a veil. Just because individuals with ASD often process and interact with the world differently does not mean they are unprofessional, incompetent or discourteous. In my professional life, I can think of several times where a parent has apologized for their child's behavior because they are Autistic only for me to laugh and tell them they weren't doing anything wrong while thinking in my head they were behaving just as well as a neurotypical child their age. They had absolutely nothing to be sorry for!

The more as a community we can try to see and understand others for who they are and embrace that rather than compare others to a mold, the better we will be able to serve our teams and accommodate all of our audiences. As a self advocate, I have found what works for me is sharing my full self with others. This includes being honest about the parts of my professional life that might be harder for me than others and getting help to overcome them while also leveraging the quirks from my diagnosis that allow me to excel and bring strength to the teams and endeavors I am a part of. While I would be lying if I said I have never faced discrimination or biases from my diagnosis and who I innately am, this approach has helped me thrive in this profession and constantly grow into a stronger and more effective leader and team player. I could not have done this if it were not for several open-minded, empathetic and nurturing people who saw my potential and took me under their wing. I want to do everything in my power to help make sure everyone, ASD or not, gets that experience and feels that way.

I am hesitant to speak for the ASD community as everyone in life is on a spectrum and all people with ASD are as different and unique as neurotypicals are. All we can do is be

genuine, take down their veil, serve and appreciate everyone among our teams and audiences for being their authentic selves, accommodate their quirks and nurture their superpowers. Lastly, we will never be done or have all the answers to inclusion as we can always do better and everyone we deal with is their own person. Really looking forward to hearing what everyone else has to add.