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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# The Autism Community Focuses on Jobs, Not Grievances

The members of our group don't think of themselves as victims. They're Tocqueville's heirs.

By Michael S. Bernick

Jan. 4, 2019 7:07 p.m. ET



An annual picnic help by Aascend, an autism mutual-support group. PHOTO: GREGORY B. YATES

A group of 30 adults met in downtown San Francisco to discuss their difficulties in finding jobs and staying employed. They were joined that November Saturday by Ranga Jayaraman, a former chief information officer at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. They

strategized how to help each other get jobs in the tech industry, and Mr. Jayaraman offered to introduce them to his contacts. Here's the twist: This was a local meeting of adults with autism, as well as family members and advocates.

Our group, known as Aascend—an acronym for Autism, Asperger Spectrum Coalition for Education, Networking and Development—is one of several autism mutual-support groups that have arisen across the U.S. I've been part of Aascend since 2011, as a family member of an adult with autism. We consider ourselves part of the long tradition of American voluntary associations celebrated by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s and by many social scientists since. Only now, in 21st-century America, the autism associations' Tocquevillian culture of mutual support makes them stand out.

Aascend's main focus for the past few years has been on employment. Though data are scarce, the largest recent study of autism employment, from Drexel University in 2017, found that only 14% of adults with autism and using government disability services held a paying job. The estimates have changed little in the past three decades, despite the numerous government departments and initiatives serving workers with disabilities.

Aascend members help each other advance. Last week an email arrived from a parent with a son on the autism spectrum. Although the son has a college degree in computer science, he hasn't been able to find a job. I forwarded the email to Mr. Jayaraman, who agreed to help with job leads. Brian Jacobs, a prominent venture capitalist, has used his tech network to identify opportunities, as has Dan Simpson at Cruise Automation. Three of our members are working now at the software company SAP, with others at Amazon, Apple and in local government. Aascend has also met with Salesforce, Airbnb, Pinterest and LinkedIn—all local employers with budding autism-targeted initiatives.

Nationally, there are autism employment volunteers doing a lot more. In Atlanta, Chet Hurwitz, a former PwC partner, and his wife, Sara Barron, have founded Ventures ATL to create small businesses specifically to employ adults with autism. These companies mostly specialize in data entry and product fulfillment. In New York, Drew Schaffran, a Morgan Lewis partner, soon

will leave law to work full-time on Extraordinary Ventures NY, which operates small candle-making, jewelry and laundry businesses. Spectrum Designs, Chocolate Spectrum and Smile Biscotti are other autism-employment-focused ventures powered by family members, not government.

There's plenty to do—and not only with employment. Aascend members help each other with housing and have created an arts collective. Our young people have formed their own social network and go to movies and sports events together. We even have a show on local television and social media, “Life on the Autism Spectrum,” with a cast and crew of people with autism.

Someone outside our community might look at these efforts and shake his head at the modest results. I wouldn't disagree. Convincing employers to overcome their preconceptions and hire people on the autism spectrum is a big challenge. Hopefully that will change, but for now, it is Aascend's culture that turns heads. There are four lessons for better civic life that everyone, with or without autism, can learn from it.

First, in my nearly 30 years of work in the autism world, I have never heard our adults on the spectrum or family members describe themselves as victims. You can imagine the challenges they face, especially those with limited language or other cognitive skills. Yet they don't consider themselves “socially oppressed” or whine about perceived slights. They are stronger than that.

Second, there is none of the racial categorizing that exists elsewhere. Autism affects all races and ethnic groups, and our membership reflects that. Race is rarely mentioned; we are united by deeper bonds and more pressing needs.

Third, Aascend members with autism are regarded as active agents, involved in all activities and decision-making, rather than passive dependents. Our members use government employment, counseling and housing services, but mainly to avoid long-term dependence on government benefits.

Fourth, we focus on tangible gains, not ideology. Republican or Democrat, nobody cares. Our common practical ventures overwhelm the animosities swirling elsewhere. In fact, after his recent Aascend talk, Mr. Jayaraman reached out to join us, attracted by the absence of politics and divisive rhetoric, and committed to connecting with individual job seekers.

There's an alternative to America's narrowing civic life. You just have to look in an unusual place to find it.

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*Appeared in the January 5, 2019, print edition.*