



Connor's Life

VOCABULARY

autism spectrum disorder: a condition that affects the brain

aide: helper

therapists: people who help others with their problems

sarcasm: use of teasing to be funny, mean, or hurtful

disabilities: things that limit a person's abilities

For years, Connor, 18, kept his condition a secret. But once he shared the truth, his whole world changed.

BY CONNOR ARCHER, AS TOLD TO JESSICA PRESS

My family says I was the happiest baby. But when I was 3 years old I still didn't talk or play with other kids. I was off in my own little world.

I had a hard time knowing

how to act around people. I couldn't express my feelings.

I had temper tantrums. I'd lie on the floor, kicking and screaming. Once, I flipped over a bunch of chairs in my house.

COURTESY OF CONNOR ARCHER



With Autism

Getting Help

When I was 3, doctors said that I had **autism spectrum disorder**. Autism can affect how you think, talk, move, act, and understand others. One expert said I might never talk!

My parents wanted to help me however they could. My mom got me into a preschool here in Maine where teachers were trained to help children like me.

Next I went to a regular public school. My parents wanted to keep me with kids of all abilities so that I could learn from them.

Starting in kindergarten, my mom invited kids from my class to our house for Halloween and birthday parties. After that, other kids included me.

I still didn't talk much, but I made friends. Maybe

they could tell I was different in some way. But they accepted me. I've had the same group of friends ever since I was a kid.

Working Hard

I had an **aide** with me at school until third grade. I met almost every day with special **therapists**. I learned to do so many new things. I started playing trumpet. I ran track.

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SHARING HIS STORY

Connor often talks to students about what it's like to be a person with autism. Here, he poses with kids at Viola Rand School in Maine.



In eighth grade, I became student council president.

But sometimes it still took me a while to find the right words. And sometimes I was still in my own little world.

Some people teased me for the way I spoke, moved, and acted. They called me names or didn't include me, so I felt left out. I didn't know how to ask them to stop or ask how to join their group.

Other times I didn't even

realize they were teasing me. Autism can make it hard to understand **sarcasm**.

People can be mean when they don't understand why you're different. And almost no one at school knew I had autism. It was like I had a big secret. But I realized it might help me if more kids knew.

In 10th grade, I had to do a presentation for health class. I decided to explain that I had autism and how it affects my

life. I was so scared to talk about it. But I also wanted to tell the truth so that people would finally understand me.

Afterward, kids actually thanked me for sharing. Some of them were people who had made fun of me. I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. And now, instead of focusing on hiding my secret, I could focus on my future.

Helping Others

Soon I started the Courageous Steps Project to help kids with autism or other **disabilities**. They can live as fulfilling a life as I do.

We've raised more than \$30,000 so far. The money helps schools buy things like iPads and stress-relief toys to help students with disabilities.

Experts said I might never talk. But now I speak to large groups of people about disabilities. And I talk to kids about what it's like to grow up with autism.

I'm a freshman in college. I still need to take breaks and get a lot of sleep. It takes a lot of mental energy to get through a day.

People with autism never beat it. But we can do amazing things for ourselves and others. As I said in my school presentation, "I am exactly the way I am supposed to be." •



SPEAKING OUT Connor speaks to a reporter at an event to raise money for the Courageous Steps Project. The event helped raise more than \$6,000.

Action Activity

You've just read "Connor's Life With Autism." Now it's time to do this activity.



HAVING FUN FOR A GOOD CAUSE
Connor (right) stands with volunteers in front of an ice cream truck at an event for his organization.

WHAT TO DO: Imagine that you are Connor Archer. A TV reporter read about you in *Action* and wants to know more about you. Answer the questions below.

1. What made you decide to share your story with *Action* readers?

2. What do you think you gained by going to a regular public school?

3. How did you feel after your presentation about autism in health class?

4. What challenges do you still face as a result of having autism?

5. What would you tell another teen who is being teased because he or she has a condition such as autism?



Answers are in the Teacher's Guide.