

January-February, 2013

Autism Bay Area

A young man with dark hair, wearing a red t-shirt and blue shorts, is captured in a dynamic running pose on a green athletic track. He is looking forward and slightly to the right. The background shows a clear blue sky and some trees, suggesting an outdoor sports field setting.

The Recreation and Leisure
Imperative for ASD

Redefining the Father's
Role

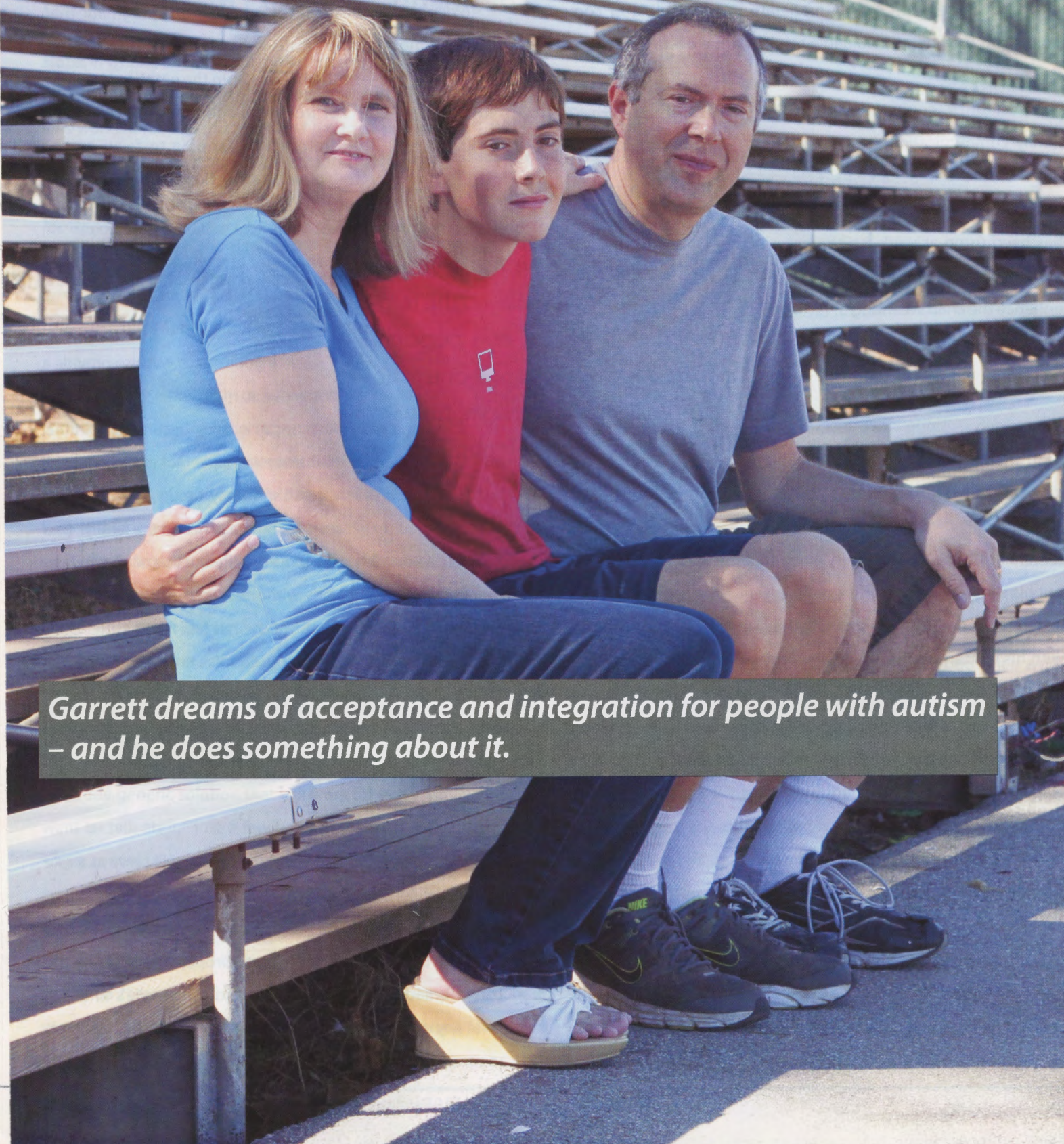
Spreading the Word
about Autism

Obtaining a Psychological/
Educational Evaluation

Building Executive
Functioning Skills

Spreading the Word about Autism

Garrett Lees



Garrett dreams of acceptance and integration for people with autism – and he does something about it.

My name is Garrett Lees and I am a 15 year-old teenager with Asperger's who is now attending a large public high school in a South Bay city. I like running and I am currently on the cross-country team at my school. I also like making short films on the weekends and attending kickboxing classes in my spare time when I am not busy running or doing homework.

As a child in elementary school, I had an extremely hard time getting along with other kids. I really tried to connect with them, but they kept making fun of me and pushing me away. I made weird noises and strange movements that couldn't help making and some kids called me a weirdo and others just ignored me. I had a difficult time back then. When I got older, I learned a little bit more about what I did when I was younger that made my typical peers think of me as bizarre, and made me an outcast. This helped me learn to regulate myself in front of them. It really aggravated me that some kids without autism couldn't accept my differences, which means they didn't accept people with autism. And I know I am not the only one on the planet who has had that experience.

Ultimately in fourth grade, there was an incident where I almost hurt one of my fellow students because they sounded like they were making fun of me. When the teacher noticed, she thankfully stopped me before I did anything to that student, pulled me aside and talked to me personally right outside the classroom about why I looked like I was going to hurt another student. I told her it was because it sounded like they were teasing and making fun of me, which really made me angry. The teacher then asked what was said to me that made me so angry. And, I told her that the other student was saying things like "You'll never be as good at anything as I am." Now looking back, he said he was joking, and I can't really tell if that student was joking or not. But at the time it really offended me. I then proceeded to tell the teacher about how I have Aspergers and that it makes it harder to connect with other kids and it can make it harder for me in school. I then said that as soon as possible I wanted to talk to my entire class about my disability. To which the teacher replied, "Do you want to talk to them right now?" I couldn't believe she allowed me to do it so soon after telling her, but I was so happy at the offer that I replied with "Yes."

So, she told the entire class to be quiet and that I had an announcement to make. I then proceeded to tell my entire class that I had autism and described my challenges. After told the



Garrett practicing for his school's cross country run

entire class about my disability, they had a lot of questions. Some examples include, "Have we offended you a lot?" and "Is that why you sometimes make weird movements?" and "I thought kids with autism were not smart enough to be in regular schools?" After answered all their questions, the entire class seemed amazed with me. There were even students who admitted that I must be a pretty smart kid with disabilities if I am able to attend a regular school. They then all started to understand and accept me more, which was simply the start of my career of informing kids around my hometown about what autism is and why it is important to accept kids who are different.

In Junior high school, it got a bit easier for me. I met some friends in my PE class and I found things that other kids enjoyed that I enjoyed as well. But, at that time I didn't know whether I should tell them I had Aspergers. At that age, I still wasn't sure they would accept me for who I was.

My teacher in junior high at the time, Ms. Thomas, really understood me, and my challenges, which helped me to open up. She encouraged me to tell some of the teachers at my middle school about autism and why it's important to understand what it

is. In the spring of my 8th grade year, I gave a presentation about autism to 10 teachers. It went really well, and I felt confident they would spread the word about Autism to all of their students. Other teachers I've had, like Ms. Kamboj and Ms. Kaci, also understand what kids with autism need. They also helped me feel good about who I was. Not enough teachers understand what Autism is exactly. Therefore, whenever they notice kids that stand out with autism, many seem as unaware as other kids, which is simply unacceptable. They must know, so when they work with kids with autism or Aspergers, they know what to do.

High School has been the best for me. Because it is where other teenagers have gotten to know me and like me the best, and I have had the most fun so far. I joined the Cross Country team and told the other kids that I have Aspergers and they have accepted me for who I am.

I think I started doing better while I was in elementary school, first when I talked to my 4th grade class and then when I started going to a film class on Saturdays at a place called Autism Social Connection, which helps kids with autism learn how to interact with peers and have a good time. It helped me to make friends and to understand that people with autism need to be understood and treated fairly for them to understand and get along with other people. Because when autistic people are treated poorly, they respond poorly. At ASC, kids with and without autism get together in groups and make short films or do animation. We also get together outside of the Center to do other fun things like hanging out at Kids' Nights out or going to the movies.

For the last few years, my friends from Autism Social Connection and I have helped to spread information about autism as much as we can. We have gone to various schools during disability awareness days to explain to younger children about autism. We have also made plenty of presentations to people in all kinds of places to make sure they are informed of autism and know what

to do when they come across someone with autism. For example, my friends and me have presented in panels to teachers explaining our experiences and giving advice on what they can do to help children with autism. We have talked at local conferences to share

our experiences and show our movies from ASC. We continue to do these very important deeds to this day.

That is why I speak to you, to all parents, to all children, and to all people on the planet. I have a dream, a dream similar to Martin Luther King Jr.'s in intensity. A dream where all autistic people and typical people are integrated not segregated. I want to help make that dream a reality. All parents must inform their children, friends, colleagues, and everyone about Autism so the segregation will stop and children with autism will lead happy lives.

"As a child in elementary school, I had an extremely hard time getting along with other kids. I really tried to connect with them, but they kept making fun of me and pushing me away. I made weird noises and strange movements that I couldn't help making and some kids called me a weirdo and others just ignored me. It really aggravated me that some kids couldn't accept my differences, which means they didn't accept people with autism. And I know I am not the only one on the planet who has had that experience."

Inviting contributions from ASD teens and young adults!

Do you feel strongly about something? Would you like to share your thoughts, feelings, and opinions? We would love to hear your perspective!

Or, do you want to share your experiences at your school, on the playground, at the library, or at the mall? Did you achieve something? Did you do something really cool? Did you try something you've always feared? How did it go?

Tell us about it!
Email us an MS Word document to:
submissions@autismbayarea.com