

The Global Autism Project, my ultimate professional sanctuary!  
Archibald Brechin  
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For many people, Monday is a perfunctory drudge mitigated by copious amounts of caffeine, planning for the next weekend or holiday, and generous smatterings of small talk with colleagues. However, for me Monday inaugurates a weeks' worth of fulfilling work and opens new doors to professional development opportunities which I had previously thought perennially shut to me. Every week I take the 3 train from my Upper West Side apartment to the Atlantic Barclays station and transfer to the R train. I emerge from the Union Street Station into the intense semi-industrious foreground of Gowanus where I am immediately inundated by the funky gritty, rustic charm of the neighborhood. Baba's perogies and freshly brewed coffee waft as I walk down the street and young yuppies sporting swiss army backpacks and goatees juxtapose semi-awkwardly with niqab clad women with shopping bags. However, I'm not here with Zagat's to critique the food nor am I an anthropologist doing my thesis on multiculturalism and diversity of Brooklyn neighborhoods. I'm heading to my internship site at the Global Autism Project, an organization I have been affiliated with for slightly over two months. There are three of us enthusiastic interns here as well as two awesome R.A.I.S.E employees. While autism affects each one of us differently it has all shaped our lives in profound ways and I believe I speak for everyone when I say that we feel honored to work for an organization that embraces our identity and works to promote the neurodiversity movement globally. As Phill Cook, our Manager of Corporate and Strategic Partners stated during a SkillCorps orientation 'we all wear a variety of different hats but are working towards the same goal; nothing less than full acceptance, integration, and accommodation of people on the autism spectrum around the world. When all five of us get together it is quite the raucous.

Upon arriving I am cordially greeted by a throng of enthusiastic smiling coworkers and the jubilant pleas of a stir-crazy dogs (a non-negotiable part of our team here). "How was your night? Did you cook any good Indian food? Got any plans in the weekend? Are you excited to start all the work you will be doing? No matter boisterously the crowd cheers upon my arrival, my intensely neurotic and overly self-critical mind continues to ruminate over yesterday's foibles. Did I post the right thing on social media or did I completely massacre my company's brand image? Did I put enough energy and thought into last week's blogpost? Was I helpful enough during last week's SkillCorps orientation? Are those Country Profiles thorough enough? Did I accurately translate those Discreate trial worksheets? Am I productive enough and adding value to the organization?" Are they aware that my anxiety has been higher than normal and wasn't on my A-game? "Oh my goodness, there going to fire me. Regardless of my ceaseless internal barrage of questions and my self-doubt infested conscience, the morning greetings all belay the same message, "We care more about you, your goals, values, and professional aspirations than a small typo in your social media post." "We understand what you are going through, and we welcome you to contribute as much or as little as you feel like today." "Don't sweat the small stuff, we are all in this together and will guide you towards meeting your professional goals" As a young adult with autism, a history of mental health issues and debilitating performance anxiety, these friendly voices and implicit reassurances never fail to reassure me and make me feel welcome at the workplace; a seemingly elusive luxury for many of my friends on the spectrum. Through my work at this organization I slowly feel myself climbing out of my cocoon of shame, self-doubt, and fear of failure and emerged as a vibrant self-confident and proud professional butterfly ready to migrate to navigate the next phase of my life.

Growing up with autism, I am all too familiar with the challenges faced by this emerging demographic and the increasing necessity for awareness, acceptance, and integration of this incredibly vibrant community. Fortunately, due to my Mothers professional background in cognitive and social psychology and the vigilance of my paternal social worker aunt, I was diagnosed early at the age of three and had access to the necessary early intervention services (ABA, Speech and occupational therapy,

assistant teachers etc.) to help me maximize my potential and integrate with my peers. Despite my earlier challenges with sensory integration, language and social skills development, executive functioning deficits, and debilitating anxiety, I later excelled at school (especially history and foreign languages) However, as I grew older and became increasingly aware and self-conscious of my social awkwardness and learning differences, I often felt alone and at times felt sub-human and “unworthy of personal and professional advancement”. Working at the Global Autism project has changed all that. When I learned that thousands of people go undiagnosed for years and that millions more do not receive the requisite services to enhance their quality of life and maximize their potential, I grew in my conviction to give back to the autistic community. I felt and continue to feel that this is the only way that I can fully “repay” my family for all their hard work and sacrifices they made to ensure that I had the chance to fully integrate into the world. I along with my colleagues at the Global Autism Project are working towards a future where every child/adult has access to the educational and occupational supports necessary to enhance their biopsychosocial wellbeing regardless of where they live or the cards they were dealt in the lottery of life. We all stand to gain by including autistic people in educational, professional, and socially settings and it is because of this that the work we do is imperative to a healthy evolving society.

So how did I end up here? I serendipitously learned about the organization while scouring the internet for autism related non-profits in New York. At the time I was working at a Real Estate office in Manhattan doing some secretarial work and other odd jobs while applying to MSW programs. Although I enjoyed the company’s atmosphere and largely got along with my co-workers I found the work unfulfilling and felt that I wasn’t growing personally and professionally. As an autistic self-advocate, the work I do here enhances my role and brings me in contact with the broader autism and disability community. Prior to coming here, I always felt somewhat on the margins of adult life, drifting in and out of different initiatives but never being able to make the most of the opportunities presented to me. Shortly after graduating secondary school, I succumbed to a debilitating clinical depression and gradually receded from the world around me eventually becoming a shadow of my former illustrious self. Like many young adults on the spectrum, the transition from the tight structure of high school to my new adult status proved daunting. While most young adults spend their late teens and early twenties establishing adult lives, going to college and exploring careers I spent that time in treatment uncovering the broken pieces of my former life. I felt myself an ersatz adult aimlessly drifting through life stuck in nostalgia for the “golden ages of my youth” while my peers swiftly graduated college, carved out careers, and even got married and started families. Surrounded by ambitious, motivated, hard-working people all my life, I yearned to join the ranks of busy working professionals and refused to settle for anything less or let my disabilities and psychological issues derail my dream. However, fettered by self-doubt and a sporadic employment history, I didn’t know where to start. I wanted to get out of my comfort zone, expand my work history, and most importantly become a small cog in the wheel of the neurodiversity movement. Then, like Manna from heaven, the Global Autism Project came into my life.

A semi-recent college graduate in international relations and future MSW student specializing in disability and mental health rehabilitation, I was unsure about my prospects and desperately wanted to find my professional niche. At the time I was seeking a professional experience that would simultaneously nurture my anthropological interests and linguistic prowess and introduce me to the world of autism advocacy in developing nations. When the Global Autism Project popped up on my browser to say that I was elated would be an understatement. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting to find an organization that embodied both multicultural engagement and disability advocacy but before I knew it I am working on blog posts, talking publicly about my experience with autism, and researching charity endowments. During my brief tenure here at the organization, I have grown exponentially both professionally and socially. I’ve observed the grind of an expanding non-profit organization and refined my office social skills (i.e. administrative tasks, organizational structures, financial aspects, task delegations).

So, what exactly goes on here that is so special? While every day is a little different but if you were to pop into our office in any given moment you will be bombarded by a panoply of dynamic activity combined with the warmth and charm of a quaint small non-profit. On the left, seated at a long oval table, determined and disciplined interns such as myself churn out blog posts, managing spreadsheets, reaching out to potential donors, and completing tasks for SkillCorps. To the right of us, Director of SkillCorps Cayley Rodgers, and Director of Outreach Cassie Harden are busy deliberating over administrative and financial matters, busily interviewing potential SkillCorps volunteers, office interns and partner sites, corresponding with our current partner sites, or organizing upcoming events. However, no matter how busy they are, they always find time to check in with us to see if we need any support. Their friendly and gregarious faces light up the office. Ann Bernie our director of professional and Special Education Doctoral student development works on her caseload while fugaciously pounding out her thesis or a new therapeutic book. Amidst all her myriad responsibilities she always finds time to chat and even obliges my request to learn more about Applied Behavioral Analysis. Behind Ann, Phil Cook the Manager of Corporate and Strategic partnerships is glued to his phone contacting potential donors and thanking SkillCorps benefactors.

Usually around midday, our founder and CEO Molly O'Pinney (if she is not on a business trip) emerges from her corner office. She decides that we're all too serious in here and lightens up the mood by offering to take us all out for ice cream. But don't let her jovial demeanor and motherly embrace fool you! She means business when it comes to our work here and makes sure we are all accountable to our deliverables. Molly is an incredible person and leaves an indelible impression on anyone who meets her. A recent TedX speaker. Although she's been out of the office for a couple of weeks traveling the country to meet with potential partners and sponsors, her entrepreneurial spirit and caring demeanor lingers with us like a guardian angel propelling us towards our vision. Molly is a momentous pioneer and change-maker in the realm of autism advocacy and her relentless energy and proclivity for social justice advocacy inspires and unites us all. I have learned so much from her about autism awareness in developing countries, running a nonprofit, systemic changemaking, and overcoming adversity from her these past months and look forward to continuing to work and learn under her tutelage.

A couple of weeks ago we were all busy running around preparing for SkillCorps orientation and now we are organizing for our latest social media campaign Project Acceptance. Getting the chance to meet so many amazing clinicians and professionals and hearing about their prior experiences on SkillCorps was incredibly enlightening and made me want to sign up for the next trip! I am usually seated at a corner fixated on my computer screen thoroughly researching information for country profiles, contacting autistic self-advocates for some of our projects, or writing blogs such as this one! On select days, Phil Cook and I are soliciting contributions from local businesses and spreading awareness of our organizations. Occasionally Jacob Sadavoy, one of our clinical staff members asks me to translate some documents into Spanish, Mandarin, Hindi, as well as interpret a couple of clinical videos into English. Lately I've also been doing outreach for our social media campaign Project Acceptance and gathering a coalition of global autistic self-advocates.

With all this going on and priorities changing at any given moment, we are certainly busy in this office. However, far from a burnout bin, we at the Global Autism Project are firm adherents of the emerging self-care movement and are constantly reminding our employees to take time for themselves. As someone who was hesitant to join the highly demanding corporate and academic worlds due to my annoying tendency to semi regularly burn out, it is extremely reassuring to know that whenever I need a break my co-workers have my back! Be assured that if you decide to join our team all your efforts will be recognized, and you will be celebrated and respected for your contributions. Also, we also celebrate birthdays here, so you better get over your shyness and let us sing to you!

Although we all play a variety of roles and bring different skills to the table, we are united in our shared imperative to promote autism awareness internationally and foster sustainable development in

autism services. We all share the inexorable hope that one day that people with autism around the world will have access to state of the art services and a chance to maximize their potential. I am eternally indebted and grateful to this organization for giving me the opportunity to work here and create a better world for people on the autism spectrum. Thanks to the Global Autism Project, I now have a concrete professional identity that I proudly share with the world. At social gatherings where I used to cower in a corner hoping that nobody would ask me the dreaded question "What would you do?" I now enthusiastically pepper my conversations with anecdotes from work and updates on the exciting initiatives I'm spearheading. I no longer feel like an ersatz adult but the burgeoning young professional I've always wanted to be. During graduate school I hope to use this place as my practicum site and continue the work that I do here. However regardless of where my degree and career take me, I will always remain committed to the cause, and affiliated with the organization. The Global Autism Project has truly become my professional sanctuary.

If you want to use your talents and skills to help us pioneer the global neurodiversity movement but know where to start, this is the place for you! If you like me are on the autism spectrum yourself and are looking for an environment where your identity and unique perspectives are not only appreciated and accepted but an invaluable asset we encourage you to apply for our internship program and unlock the possibilities. No matter where you are in your professional development our team will do the upmost to support and accommodate your individual needs, desires, and ambitions. Whether you are full time at the office with us or contribute a couple hours remotely from home, we value your contributions and will accommodate your schedule to make working with us an unforgettable experience! Thanks for reading my story!

Outreach intern  
Archie