

Carriers ask for understanding about autism



Jeff Maure

April is Autism Awareness Month, a time for people to better understand the disorder and how it can affect them or people they may encounter. Several letter carriers share their experiences of living with autism or with a loved one who does.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) denotes a wide range of conditions including difficulty with social skills, as well as repetitive behaviors and speech. As a spectrum disorder, the effect it has on people can differ sharply from person to person, according to Autism Speaks—an organization that advocates for enhanced services, inclusion, resources and support for the autism community. Once considered a severe disability, it's now understood as a condition that many people living typical lives may have, including letter carriers.

The causes of autism aren't fully known, but scientists believe that there is a genetic component to it, with a growing area of research focusing on the interaction of genetic and environmental factors, according to the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. (No link has been found between autism and vaccines.)

Jeff Maure, a Mishawaka, IN Branch 820 carrier, said that being a letter carrier is a great career for him because his autism makes him very organized and efficient at his job. He has been a letter carrier for 28 years.

Maure said that when he was tested for autism, they also tested his processing speed and found that he processed information 90 percent faster than the average person. He said that this helps him with reading letters quickly. On the other hand, his fast process-

ing speed can complicate things when people are speaking to him.

"Sometimes it gets me in trouble because I'll be too fast," said Maure. "[My wife will] explain something to me and I've already processed it and moved on."

For most of Maure's life, he didn't know he was on the autism spectrum. It was only a year and a half ago that he was diagnosed. When he found out, he said he wasn't surprised because, "I've always known I was a little different." As far as the autism spectrum goes, Maure said he has Asperger's syndrome, a form of "high-functioning" autism.

He likes having his routine on his route. Every day he likes to get to a certain spot by a certain time and if he doesn't get there on time, he feels anxious.

"I've got certain time points," said Maure. "I've got to be at this place at a certain time. I hate being behind; I hate being behind schedule."

Maure said that because of autism he does struggle with social skills.

"I'd say one of the negative things about it is I've always been kind of socially awkward," said Maure.

For people who don't know much about autism, Maure said that "the main thing is to be understanding." That includes, he said, just asking if you don't understand something. For example, Maure organizes his truck in a certain way that makes sense to him, but that's different from how many of his co-workers organize their trucks. He positions all of his letters with the address side facing up so he can see the addresses, whereas many carriers do the opposite, he said.

“A lot of people think it’s weird, but I just do it because that’s what makes sense,” said Maure. “If you ask me a question, I’m more than happy to explain, but you’ve kind of got to get me started a little bit.”

Despite feeling as though he can be socially awkward at times, Maure ran for vice president of his branch and won, serving in the role for the past two years. This year he became branch president.

Michael Hynes, a Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 carrier, has been a letter carrier for 10 years and says that being a letter carrier is “one of the best jobs that I’ve ever had.”

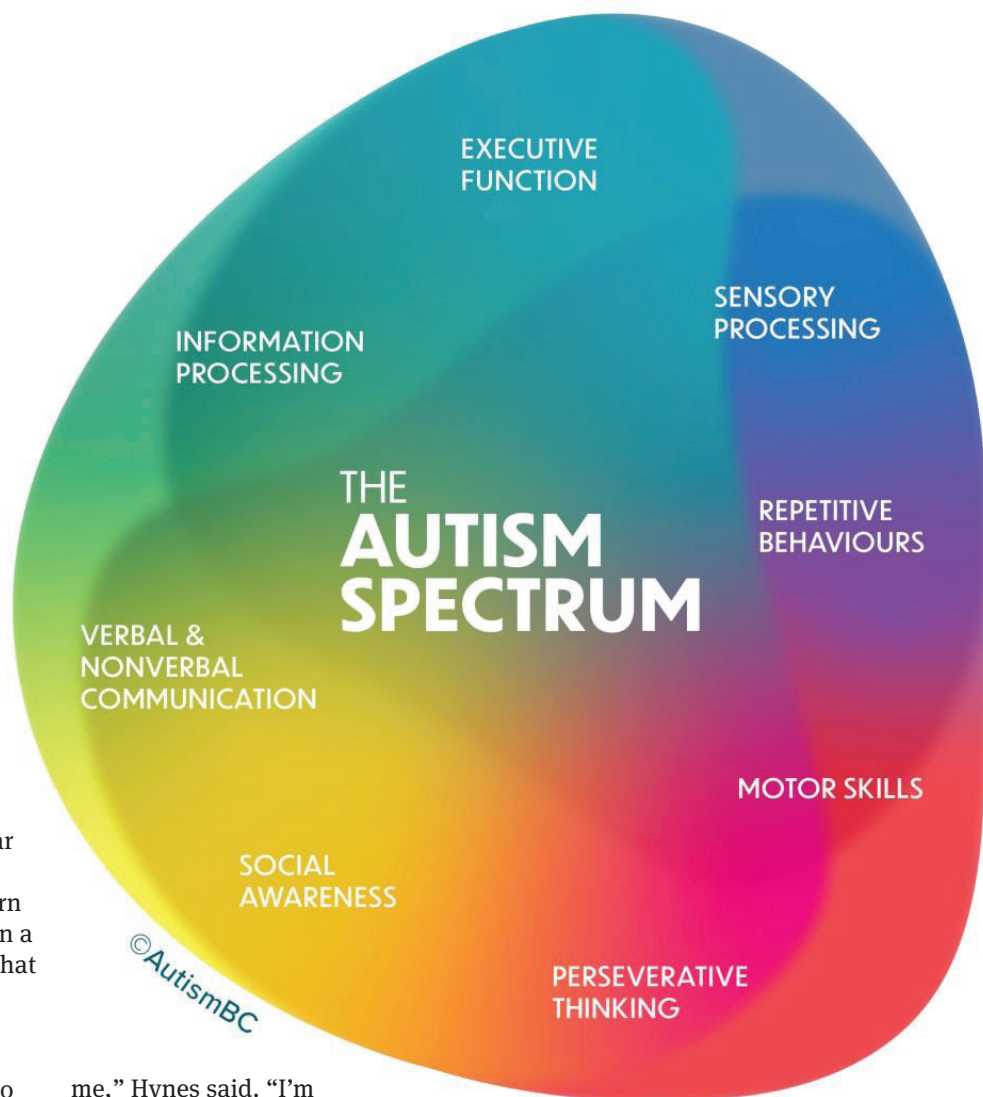
Hynes said that not only does he have a slight form of autism, he also has attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This is common, with a majority—50 to 70 percent—of those on the autism spectrum having both ADHD and autism, according to the National Institutes of Health.

“Somehow I’ve been able to manage, to be able to control it. And this job keeps me focused and it helps me, keeps me on tasks,” Hynes said, but added, “Some days are harder than others.”

He likes to keep himself organized so that everyone gets their mail on time and, of course, at the correct house. For residences that have five to 10 parcels or more, he gives them their own separate bucket in his truck.

In contrast with Maure, Hynes said that what he excels at and likes most about the job is having interactions with others.

“I deliver in the town that I grew up in, so there’s a lot of people that know



me,” Hynes said. “I’m out and about and it’s just the interactions I feel. It’s very good for me.”

He said during the COVID-19 pandemic it was hard for him not to be able to see people during lockdowns, so seeing his customers out in the neighborhoods really kept him going.

Hynes echoed Maure’s opinion that people should ask those with autism why they do things a certain way.

“If they have questions, they should ask,” said Hynes. “I feel that that that they shouldn’t discredit people. Give them a chance to do it and you’d be surprised.”

Taylor Chandler, a six-year carrier from Grand Rapids, MI Branch 56, has a 10-year-old son named Quentin who has autism that doctors labeled as “high-functioning.” He was diagnosed when he was 5 years old.

Understanding autism (cont.)

Chandler said that his son struggles with becoming overstimulated, often from excess noise or wearing fabrics that he deems uncomfortable. Quentin often takes things literally, so he doesn't always understand expressions and sarcasm.

When he became overstimulated at school, he'd often run home and hide in their garage. Ultimately, the Chandlers switched to homeschooling.

Chandler said that he and his wife have to let him "info dump," which is what they call it when Quentin needs to talk about everything he wants to say at once. After he starts slowing down and calms down a bit, they are able to start asking him questions.

Instead of asking him direct questions, which could be considered confrontational, Chandler and his wife take a more indirect approach to asking their son questions. They ask in a more relaxed format, like, "Hey, I was just wondering, how are you?"

Chandler said that if a letter carrier was to see his son or another person with autism in distress, it might be best to keep an eye on them and alert local authorities. Quentin can go into "fight or flight" mode when overstimulated, so the carrier said that having people unfamiliar around him could further upset him.

Chandler wants people to know that it's important to be understanding of people who have autism.

"It doesn't necessarily always look the same, even between autistic people," he said. "Being understanding and not treating them differently, that's what my son is very big on. He



doesn't want to be treated differently [just] because his mind works differently. 'I want to be treated the same because I'm normal to me. So, when you treat me like I'm not normal, then I feel bad about myself.' "

Although there are problems that Quentin faces when it comes to autism, Chandler said that his son excels at other things, such as visualizing and recreating concepts and images. Quentin does this by drawing and creating things with Lego bricks.

"He's really good at remembering the detail of something, even if he just barely saw it," Chandler said.

"April may be Autism Awareness Month, but it's best for all of us to always be aware and understanding of what those with autism are dealing with," NALC President Brian L. Renfroe said. "As letter carriers, we never know when we might come into contact with customers or other letter carriers who have autism." **PR**