

Challenge Unlimited Celebrates Differences During Autism Acceptance Month

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - For Challenge Unlimited, Autism Acceptance Month isn't just about accepting differences; it's about celebrating them.

The Alton-based organization helps disabled job-seekers connect with meaningful employment throughout the Riverbend region. Challenge Unlimited is pushing people to think about inclusivity and acceptance all year long, not just during April.

"I think by this time, if you don't realize autism spectrum disorder exists, you must be living under a rock," said Stephanie Schrage, Challenge Unlimited marketing manager. "One in 36 kids is diagnosed with this in this country, so it's a common thing for parents and communities to have to just realize that everybody's different. And that's really the theme this month, celebrating differences."

Schrage and Toni, a volunteer with Challenge Unlimited and parent to a 12-year-old daughter on the autism spectrum, both note the importance of acknowledging and accommodating differences. They point out that people with autism might need different tools, but they have the same interests, challenges and successes as neurotypical people do. Additionally, everybody on the spectrum has their own experience.

"Autism is not a linear diagnosis. It is very much a color wheel, and every person with autism doesn't have the same colors," Toni explained. "Every diagnosis is different. Every situation is unique. And everyone has unique abilities...It's not about them changing for society. It is about society allowing them to be themselves."

Toni knows that it can feel isolating to be a parent of a child with special needs, just like it can be isolating to be neurodivergent in a society built for neurotypical people. This is partly why she encourages inclusion. She said she takes her daughter with her everywhere, from church to El Monstero concerts.

The isolation is also why she advocates for Challenge Unlimited. While the organization is geared towards adults, Toni noted that it's a good idea to research and become involved in groups like this when your children are still young. She said that because of Challenge Unlimited, she knows her daughter will be cared for and supported even after Toni can no longer advocate for her.

“Parents, I think, feel very alone, so Challenge lets you know there are people living in this world that care about the future of other people,” she said. “What happens to our children who need advocacy after our ability to help them? That's where places like Challenge step in. When you don't know that something like Challenge exists, then you have to go, ‘What's going to happen to them? Will they ever have a future?’ And places like Challenge provide a future.”

While Challenge Unlimited focuses on employment services and community housing, they also support people with disabilities and their loved ones through all of life's challenges. Schrage noted that approximately 60% of autistic adults are unemployed or underemployed, and Challenge Unlimited aims to decrease this number through support, job-carving services, vocational training and other resources.

Schrage and Toni hope people will think differently about autism as Autism Acceptance Month continues. They encourage people to be accepting of the tools that others need to feel secure and happy, and they push for inclusivity in all events, venues and conversations.

“We've always kind of put a standard on people that you have to think and learn a certain way. And I think what autism acceptance is about is realizing that we really are all different, we all learn differently, we all have different abilities,” Schrage added. “We make assumptions, and that's part of the theme with acceptance. We've learned a lot about autism spectrum disorder in the last 20 years, but we have a lot more to learn.”

Visit the [official Challenge Unlimited website at CUInc.org](http://CUInc.org) to learn more about the organization and their work.



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