

Seeing Ability, Not Just Disability

Hi, I am Hayden. This is my story. I have several disabilities: autism, dyspraxia, learning disabilities and Ehlers-Danlos syndrome.

I am also hard-working and have amazing attention to detail. I am a keen collector of vinyl records.

I love photography. I took up photography at a young age to help me cope with the challenges of life and to build up my confidence in going to different places.

Every place is different. I get to meet different people from all walks of life. I have always found it interesting to hear other people's stories about their lives. Depending on the person, I like to share experiences of disability with people too.

My photography connects me to the outside world. It stops me from feeling trapped. I like to show people the photos I have created.

I am interested in photographing most things. This can include street photography, automotive photography, music concerts, portraits and taking unusual self-portraits. I have exhibited my work in galleries and even had some pictures published.

I went to a special school over 40 miles away from home. The days were long, 12-hour days from the age of 12.

I enjoyed school. During my final year, I built up enough confidence to go on an expedition to Switzerland.

I left school with a promise of a place in art college, but unfortunately it was short-lived. Only two weeks in, I was told that my needs were too great and, at that point in time, I was advised to attend an independent living course for a year or two, then go back to the art course.

I followed their advice and learned some different skills over the three years I attended. I was accepted to go back onto the course five days later. However, a meeting was held to say, unfortunately, my Maths and English skills would not be sufficient to continue the course.

Despite further meetings to try and resolve the problem, I was told it was the end of the road for my educational journey.

I was wished good luck and advised to sign off as unfit to work. I was 20 years old and had hopes and dreams for my future as an artist and photographer, these were shattered. My life soon came to a standstill.

In many ways, there is no routine to my life. Nothing much to get up for unless my family had arranged trips for me.

I have continued to take photographs and edit them. I have my camera with me at all times. I believe the art of photography is a form of communication.

Why then must we have certificated standards of English and Maths to be able to learn how to express ourselves in an art traditionally a non-verbal form?

Art has an immense power to represent one's thoughts. Throughout the ages, people have used images to communicate, from cave drawings to present-day murals.

My disabilities haven't hindered my talents, but, in my belief, the educational system has.

Life can have its own challenges, and often the same with disabilities. Rather than supporting and helping, education has removed my right to learn with support.

I have continued to learn, but I have had to do this alone. I am self-taught and I reach out to other photographers for advice. I Google things, I look through books and watch YouTube alone.

I have no real network of peers for support. I would have if I had been able to study in the way others have.

With the pandemic of loneliness and isolation in autistic adults, the National Autistic Society, in 2019, data showed 76% of autistic adults have asked for mental health support in the previous five years.

And a new report by Swansea University in 2023 says that autistic people are more likely to be lonely than neurotypical people. They are also much more likely to be distressed by their loneliness.

A report from the Office for National Statistics shows that just 21% of autistic people are in employment, and autistic people still face the highest rates of unemployment of all disabled groups.

I ask for three things.

One, for people to have a better understanding and knowledge of autism and learning disabilities.

Two, for education to support talent and remove boundaries they set for qualifications.

Three, for support into and during employment, creating a workplace community that helps manage anxiety.

Autism is as much an ability as a disability. I may struggle with some things, but I have an incredible focus on detail.

I want to work, I want to be productive and I want to have friends.