

AUTISM

ASPERGER'S **SENSORY** DIGEST®

Social Media, TV

Elizabeth Irish

Film, Art

Keri Bowers,
Taylor Cross,
James Poggione

Countries: India

Suresh Somani's

Vision: India

Autism Center

**Corporations
and Coalitions:
Subway &
Grant A Gift Teen
Works Program**

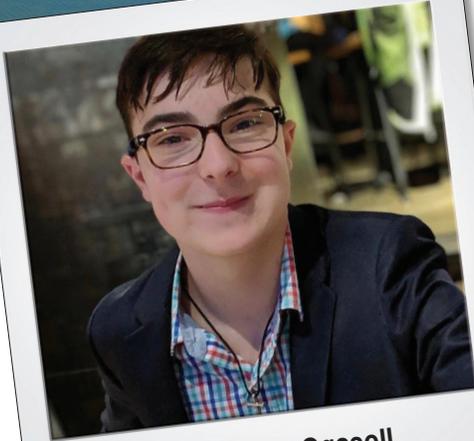
Lives Lived Full & Lost

A New Book
to Protect Lives;
Jacob Brian Cassell
by Carol Stock
Kranowitz

Attitudes on Autism Are Changing!

Because of Jake

by Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA



Jacob Brian Cassell
October 10, 2001 - August 1, 2019



Jake Cassell flew into my arms when we met. He wriggled onto my lap, jiggled my earrings, and giggled with delight. At four, he wasn't speaking much, but we needed no words to communicate. After leaving his home — where I had come to consult his mother Jennifer, my website designer — I felt happy all day.

That was Jake's effect on everybody. Like others with autism, he exhibited what I call "extrasensory grace," a certain quality that connected him to people. You'd meet him, you'd instantly be in sync, and later, as you went about your daily doings, you'd feel his nearness, like having an angel on your shoulder.

A few seasons ago, after a hiatus of several years, we met again. Jake enfolded me in a hug, saying, "Haven't seen you in a while!"

"Do you remember me, Jake?"

"Sure! You're special!"

How did he remember me? He just

did. To him, everyone was special and memorable.

Jennifer recounts going to church with Jake when he was small. As the family settled into their seats, Jake reached to hold a woman's hand in the pew behind them. She gripped his little hand, inhaled, exhaled, and began to cry. "We didn't know her or her story. But Jake knew, he just knew," Jennifer says.

Bicycling to the pool last summer, 17-year-old Jake chose to ride on the sidewalk beside a busy road. He swerved to avoid a row of trash cans and fell into the street. A driver couldn't avoid hitting him. The next morning, Jake died.

Because of Jake's death, many things have happened. For example, the Maryland Department of Transportation convened a working group to consider how to protect pedestrians and bikers better along this dangerous stretch of road. The family established The Jacob Cassell

Scholarship Fund at The Diener School, which Jake attended for elementary school, to benefit autistic children whose families cannot afford the tuition. More funds in Jake's memory have poured into Project Honduran Child, a family-founded nonprofit that Jake enjoyed participating in, to provide backpacks, school supplies and uniforms to over 140 kids in five impoverished mountain villages so they can attend school.

Because of Jake's life, even more good things happened. Read his obituary, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/legacy/obituary.aspx?n=jacob-brian-cassell-jake&pid=193590467&fhid=3397> to get the gist.

What would the world be like without people like Jake? Temple Grandin says, "The world needs people with autism to invent things, fix things, and make art and music." *Because he had autism*, Jake did all these things, sensationally.

• **Invent things** — (Inventors with autism include Nikola Tesla, inventor of the alternating current electric induction motor; Vernon Smith, inventor of experimental economics; and Satoshi Tajiri, creator of Pokémon.) In the summer before he died, Jake was developing a blueprint to include blue LED lights on every airplane, since he found these to be soothing. His goal was to incorporate comfortable lighting in the cabins and on the TVs to make airplanes more pleasant for each traveler. He planned to submit his invention to Boeing when the drawing spread across the dining room table was completed.

• **Fix things** — (Fixers with autism include Temple Grandin, whose work improves the quality of life for livestock; John Elder Robison, an advocate for autism-related policies and research; and Greta Thunberg, climate activist and *Time* magazine’s 2019 Person of the Year.) Noticing that his high school’s sports teams lacked an active mascot, Jake volunteered to don the smelly, sweaty Bulldog costume with the fierce headpiece. Jake not only relished but also revolutionized this physically uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing role. His cheerful goal was not to intimidate the opponents but to inspire the home teams. In one year, he attended more than 50 athletic games! Because of his success in building school spirit, the principal, Brandice Heckert, ordered a new bulldog costume with a smiling face to match Jake’s happy personality. She intended to give it to him in September, saying, “He was so excited about it. He deserved it.” The mascot uniform is now lovingly dedicated as “Jake the Bulldog.”

• **Make art** — (Artists with autism include Michelangelo, Andy Warhol, and Stephen Wiltshire, who draws complicated cityscapes after one quick

glance.) Jake’s autistic, artistic eye for innovative visual design developed as he grew. Mike Schechter, Jake’s Cub Scout leader, describes a weird, unappetizing cake that Jake created for a baking project. It was a sheet cake covered with blue sprinkles and Tootsie Rolls. Mr. Schechter asked Jake what his idea was. “He fell over laughing. The cake was decorated to look like a cat litter box!” When the other Cub Scouts understood his zany joke, they devoured the cake. In the weeks prior to his accident, Jake was designing, with phenomenal detail, a puncheon walkway from which to observe a natural wetland at Patuxent River State Park as his Eagle Scout project. His Boy Scout Troop 233 completed the project in his memory.

• **Make music** — (Musicians with autism include pianist/singer Kodi Lee, featured in *AASD* in the November 2019 issue; singer Susan Boyle, a winner on Britain’s Got Talent show; and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.) As a musician, Jake sang at church events and local teenage karaoke spots, specializing in songs such as “Lean on Me,” “Carry Me Away,” and countless worship songs. With his extrasensory in-tune-ness, intuition and natural rhythm, he accompanied other performers on the bongo drums

and got everyone on their toes, singing, clapping and moving in sync.

Because of autism — not in spite of it — Jake made things happen. With love and joy, helping everyone do better was his mission. “You can do this,” he would say, pumping his fist. “Bring it home. Do it!”

Because of Jake, we are doing our best. ■

Please consider donating in Jake’s memory to The Diener School (<https://thedienerschool.org/Donate-Jake/>) or to Project Honduran Child (<http://projecthonduranchild.com/>).



Find other activities in *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, *The Goodenoughs Get In Sync*, *Growing an In-Sync Child*,

and *The In-Sync Activity Cards Book*. Carol Stock Kranowitz’s recent book in her “Sync” series is *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up*. Carol is available for workshops on how SPD affects children and on fun and functional sensory-motor activities to get kids in sync.

www.CarolStockKranowitz.com



Jake the Bulldog at Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Maryland. Go here to see the new “Jake the Bulldog” uniform that Jake did not live to wear: <https://www.scoopnest.com/s/Jake%20Cassell>

