

AUTISM ACCEPTANCE MONTH

These incredible people on the autism spectrum show the world that neurodiversity is a superpower. May their stories inspire you to celebrate differences – the Autism Society of America’s theme this year.



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GRETA THUNBERG

Born January 3, 2003

ACTIVIST

Read more: <https://bit.ly/2QAQvLU>



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ARMANI WILLIAMS

Born April 14, 2000

NASCAR DRIVER

Read more: <https://nas.cr/3dQq8us>

Climate activist Greta Thunberg started her global youth movement in August 2018 by skipping school and camping out in front of the Swedish Parliament for weeks to protest emissions. That same year, she got the world’s attention with her passionate speech at the UN Climate Change Conference. She inspired the Global Climate Strike in 2019, the largest climate protest in world history with 4 million people in attendance.

Thunberg was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, OCD and selective mutism. Initially, she wasn’t open about her diagnosis, and was bullied in school and had an eating disorder. She struggled with depression. Her life changed the day her school played a film about pollution in the ocean and she discovered her passion to save the environment. In addition to protesting and giving speeches around the world, she has reduced her carbon footprint by becoming vegan, upcycling and giving up flying.

Thunberg calls autism her superpower. In the *I Am Greta* documentary, she says, “Sometimes I feel that it might be good if everyone had a tiny bit of Asperger’s, at least when it comes to the climate.” She credits autism for her ability to stay hyper focused on the topic of climate change – she’s been passionately researching it since she was 9 years old – and to see the gravity of the climate crisis in black and white terms.

Armani Williams’ parents were so overwhelmed when doctors told them their son had autism when he was 2 years old. They worried that he would never be able to live independently, or even be able to ride a bike someday. However, a 2-week bike course for children with autism revealed Williams’ need for speed – and he learned how to ride a bike in one day.

Williams is the first NASCAR driver openly diagnosed on the autism spectrum. He uses his races to raise awareness for autism, support research, and help families that are impacted. In 2015, Williams and his family established the Armani Williams Race 4 Autism Foundation. He is also one of only three Black drivers competing in NASCAR.

One may assume that having a disorder that makes it difficult to process multiple sensory stimuli simultaneously and communicate would make racing impossible, but Williams doesn’t see it that way. “Being autistic, I find this [to be] an advantage for me because I’m so focused and concentrated behind the wheel. That goes with being consistent, smooth, and seeing the big picture leading up to the race ... it has really helped me develop as a pro racecar driver.” To date, the 21-year-old has 18 wins and two championships.



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SATOSHI TAJIRI

Born August 28, 1965

VIDEO GAME DESIGNER

Read more: <https://bit.ly/3nliYI3>



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DAWN PRINCE-HUGHES

Born January 31, 1964

ANTHROPOLOGIST

Read more: <https://bit.ly/32NmlI3>

Tajiri’s childhood obsession with insects earned him the nickname “Dr. Bug” growing up. As much as he enjoyed collecting bugs, he thought other people would be interested in a game where they collect and share characters. That game became the world-wide phenomenon, Pokémon.

Tajiri’s colleagues thought of him as “reclusive” and “eccentric.” While developing the game, he would work for 24 hours, then sleep for 12. Those extreme lengths paid off as the game that Nintendo was initially skeptical of has gone on to be one of the most successful, multi-billion dollar media franchises. There are Pokémon games, books, movies, merchandise, and more.

Tajiri once said, “Everything I did as a kid is kind of rolled into one. That’s what Pokémon is.” People on the autism spectrum say they enjoy playing the game because it involves strategy and collecting things, and requires memorization – with a consistent, fixed number of characters. Many parents have said that Pokémon Go, an augmented reality version of the game, has enabled their kids on the spectrum to become social, make friends, and feel like they belong to a community.

Dr. Prince-Hughes was bullied growing up, so she ran away from home at age 15 and ended up homeless and struggling to make ends meet. She used one of her first paychecks to visit the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, and, there, she realized she felt a strong connection to the gorillas. That “a-ha moment” launched her career as an anthropologist.

Dr. Prince-Hughes was diagnosed with autism at 38 years old. The diagnosis wasn’t even in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual until she was 30. Lack of understanding of her sensory issues and obsessive behaviors made her disconnect from the world and turn to alcohol to cope at a young age. Dr. Prince-Hughes says that working with gorillas helped her develop coping mechanisms for her Asperger’s syndrome. Visiting them took her out of social isolation, and she learned social cues and the subtleties of feelings by observing gorilla families.

Dr. Prince-Hughes visited the zoo for years before she was eventually accepted into a zoo program for educating undergraduate college students. She then went on to get her master’s and PhD degrees in interdisciplinary anthropology. She has worked with the Jane Goodall Institute and is currently a professor at Western Washington University. Dr. Prince-Hughes has published many books, including her memoir *Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey Through Autism*.