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Autism World

Magazine



SCHOOL AND YOU

Chantal Sicile-Kira

***PREPARING FOR THE
WORLD OF WORK***

NEED SLEEP?

Autism World

Magazine

*Supporting the global ASD
and Asperger community*



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APAC 2013 Future Leaders



by Malcolm Mayfield

In August I attended and presented at my first national conference and my first international conference. The national conference was for Disability Employment Australia at the Adelaide Hilton. The international conference was APAC 2013 at the Adelaide Convention Centre.

I was both cautious and excited about the third Asia Pacific Autism Conference.

The cautious part of me was mindful of hearsay from other autism conferences, where historically autism has been negatively referred to by scientists and researchers. This concern was enhanced when the first keynote speaker of the conference started to talk about what was “wrong” with the autistic brain. His presentation was interesting and informative, but was unfortunately laced with judgmental rather than comparative words.

Then the conference took a positive shift. Young Daniel Giles stood up as keynote speaker in the opening plenary and spoke brilliantly in his own distinctive yet compellingly powerful voice about his journey and path on the autism spectrum. This focus of the conference shifted to the autistic perspective and the intent turned to the strengths of the autism spectrum.

Daniel is a member of the APAC Future Leaders program; a group of twenty-three inspirational young autistic adults ranging in age from 19 to 28 years in age. The Future Leaders hailed from various locales around Australia and New Zealand and were supported by eight mentors; two from New Zealand, one each from Tasmania and Victoria, three from South Australia and one from Western Australia.

I had the honour of being selected as one of the South Australian mentors, hence my pre-conference excitement concerning APAC 2013. The Future Leaders program was a first for any autism conference in the world and will set a precedent for any conferences that follow. Finally autism was given an identity; a strong and very capable identity.

I chaired a concurrent session on day one of APAC in which all three presenters and myself as chair were all members and mentors on the Future Leaders program. The presentations were compelling and positive. The feedback and questions confirmed this.

In opening the session I said that the presenters “were not future leaders” and then I paused for effect. I wanted the audience to explore my meaning before saying, “they are leaders right now.” The applause confirmed that collective belief.

These young adults are leading the way for autism. Some are on the board for the Autistic Self Advocacy Network of Australia and New Zealand (ASAN AuNZ) while others are out in the community advocating for greater understanding and inclusion of autistic individuals. They and many others around the world are starting to speak and stand for themselves and their voices are being heard in all of the right places.

The distinctive black Future Leaders polos and hoodies were designed to stand out at APAC 2013 so that delegates could recognise, approach and talk to the members and mentors and learn more about autism from those that live and breathe it.

I will close with a story from day three of APAC, where I was talking to a teacher in the exhibition hall about the perception of behaviour. I had a Future Leader member with me at the time who I used as a willing model in my impromptu presentation.

I said it is easy for people to despair about the future of their child or student when confronted with behaviours that scream of overwhelm and confusion. It is also common for the perception of the child’s state and abilities to be frozen in time in the belief that he or she will never improve or know success in this world. In our darkest times, we often believe that there is no way forward or back, until someone turns on a light and shows us the way forward.

This is the power and the value of the Future Leaders and this is why they are leaders now. They have all been in the darkness and have found their way forward into lighter places. Some are still feeling their way while others are standing up in the light and shining for all to see. All are demonstrating that there is a way through.



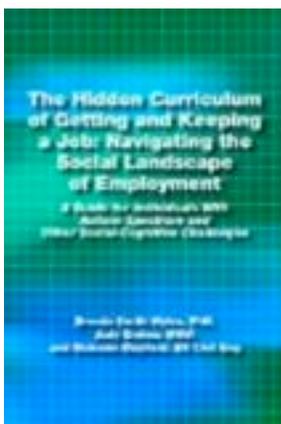
APAC 2013 Future Leaders group

I created Autism STAR Pty. Ltd to be a guiding light to those navigating the autism spectrum. APAC 2013 showed me that I am not alone in my beliefs about the strengths and abilities of autism. There is a galaxy of stars igniting all around us – all demonstrating ways in which you can open your child, your student to shine.

The organisers of APAC 2015 have pledged publicly to continue the Future Leaders program in Brisbane. Let this be the beginning of autistic inclusion and acceptance in any conference going forward and may this trend extend to society in general.



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**Malcolm Mayfield is co-author of
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