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Autism Awareness: The Missing Piece

"No! Don't say that! I don't wanna talk about it!" Trevor was having a fit. He defiantly plugged his ears and shut his eyes as I told him about the kids at Awesome Club who also had Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). I sat next to him on his bed, trying to explain that having Asperger's Syndrome was nothing to be ashamed of. All I accomplished was an increase in his fury because I had wrinkled his sheets. Towering over me with his six-foot-two frame, he clumsily pushed me out of his room and slammed the door, grumbling that he now needed to fix his bed. As I stood behind the closed door of his room, I knew he was engrossed in the detailed process of remaking his bed one layer at a time. This kind of behavior was not out of the ordinary for my brother Trevor.

Trevor's condition is a mild form of autism, a complex neurological disorder that affects one's ability to communicate. For Trevor this also includes difficulties coping with sensory overload, social interaction, changes in routine, and obsessive compulsions such as the need to keep his bedroom "just so." Trevor used to be uncomfortable talking about his condition, but he is slowly becoming more open because he knows he is not alone.

Minnesota is number one nationwide for its high prevalence of autism, with 1 in every 65 children diagnosed with some form of ASD; this is higher than the national average of 1 in 110. As the fastest growing developmental disorder, it is expected to increase at a rate of 10 to 17 percent annually. This has enormous implications for our society as these individuals reach the age of employment; they can either become employed, tax-paying citizens or unemployed, tax-receiving citizens. These alarming statistics must be addressed. As Miss Minnesota, I plan to focus on what I feel are three "missing pieces" in regards to autism:

I. Social Skills Programs: My brother Trevor has struggled with social skills his entire life. Watching him eat lunch alone at school every day was heart breaking. One day he came to me in tears, apologizing for not understanding how to make friends. It is usually thought that people with autism care little about interacting with others. This is not always true; Trevor wants to fit in just like everyone else. A social skills class implemented at Trevor's school changed his life. For the first time, he had someone to sit with at lunch; he even joined several activities with his new "buddies." Trevor's experience inspired me to take action. In 2008 I founded Awesome Club, a social skills program for children with ASD. It is my hope that every school in Minnesota recognizes the need for programs like Awesome Club in their school districts. Social skills programs boost the self-esteem of individuals with ASD and prepare them for life after high school when communication is key to success in the work field and in life. As Miss Minnesota, I will work to implement these vital programs across the state.

II. Fund Raising: Over the past four years, I have developed a strong relationship with the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM) through their annual Steps of Hope fundraiser. This walk for autism raises an average of \$80,000 to \$100,000 each year, which contribute to AuSM's many quality of life initiatives, including awareness, employment, and education efforts. During my year of service as Miss Minnesota, I will continue to support this incredible fund raising effort as an official spokesperson for the Autism Society. These funds are crucial to supporting thousands of Minnesota families impacted by autism.

III. Awareness: My primary goal as Miss Minnesota is to increase awareness of ASD. I hope to educate others not only about the challenges these individuals face, but also about the many gifts they have to offer our community. According to the Autism Society of America, 1.5 million Americans are diagnosed with some form of autism. This large number does not include the number of family members, school systems, and work places that are also impacted by this disorder. As Miss Minnesota, I will continue to be an advocate and a resource people can turn to concerning this fascinating cerebral difference. I will use the crown as a powerful tool to spread awareness through the media, school systems, civic organizations, and community events in order to create a culture of acceptance.

This year, Trevor graduated from high school with the goal of gaining acceptance into college. During the process he told our mother, "Mom, I just want them to give me a chance." St. Cloud State University did just that. My brother and others challenged by autism deserve a chance to survive and thrive in our society. Trevor is a true symbol of overcoming the challenges of his condition. By sharing my brother's story, I will instill hope in those who live with autism every day. As Miss Minnesota, I will be a strong voice for Minnesota's autism community. The Miss Minnesota Education Foundation will provide me the means to touch the lives of many and to call attention to this important cause.

Signature/Date