

John Greally - a man for all Aspies

The way John Greally sees it, all “Aspies” are fascinated by something, be it railway engines or bus timetables. His particular interest is Asperger Syndrome itself.

He knew he was different from others at an early age and by 19 was calling himself “semi autistic” as a way to rationalise his place in the world. It still stuns him that he didn’t recognise similar signs in his son, now 11.

“It was pointed out by a kindergarten assistant. I kicked myself that I didn’t recognise it,” he says.

Now at 48, John Greally, is a passionate advocate for people with higher functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome. In 2007 the Upper Hutt man launched Asperger’s Syndrome New Zealand, a not-for-profit organisation specifically by and for autistic people.

While New Zealand had parent support groups, government groups and social groups, John believed there was a need for an information and advocacy organisation by, of and for “Aspies”.

“Some of us don’t just want to hang out socially. We want to fix some of the poor attitudes and a lot of the ignorance about autism that is out there. Much of the information comes from parent and professional sources – not from those who actually experience autism themselves.

“I wanted an organisation that was just for people with Asperger’s. Information from Autism New Zealand is largely parent-based and Altogether Autism is evidence based. We are the one that was largely missing.

“When people with autism are looking for information, we are more likely to be trusted. We can talk about something we have that nobody else can understand. It’s like looking



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at a monkey through the bars. In the end, it pays to be the monkey.”

John’s days are filled with emails, phone calls, advocacy work and meetings, occasionally to the point where his neighbour has cooked dinner because there hasn’t been a break in the day for him to prepare it.

At Government level, he has served on the ASD advisory group preparing guidelines for service to people with disabilities. He was recently appointed to a new advisory group that will carry on from the guidelines group.

John is driven by his belief that Aspies have a human right to their own place in society without limitation. He says the government has spent \$18

million on the needs of children and adolescents with autism. Now the focus should go onto adults, especially those aged 22-26 who would have been among the first officially diagnosed in New Zealand since 1996.

“Those people are now through school and university. Some have no jobs. Some are living rough. To my mind, these are the people who are supposed to be driving the knowledge-based economy. If you squeeze out the people who are different, you squeeze out the edge that New Zealand has traditionally had in innovation.”

For all the time John puts into his work, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I swear I get more out of what I do than the people I assist get out of me. They are an incredible array of people with so much important in common but also so much difference. We are people you warm to slowly – an acquired taste, like all the best types of wine.”

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