

Transcript of Testimony

Good evening. My name is Michelle Sideleau Wendt and I am from Easton, CT.

I received an education about human interaction that was not a part of my studies as an undergraduate Psychology major. Unlike college, this didn't happen in a classroom for credit, and there was no syllabus. I didn't even know what I had signed up for.

When Brendan was three he was diagnosed with PDD and nothing can prepare a parent for all that lies ahead. When I hear people use the word 'mild' or high functioning I know they have no idea how difficult mild is and that the lows that go along with high functioning can be debilitating. Its at times been a very perplexing and interesting journey that has made me a better person.

Raising my first child taught me a lot about the complexity of the human brain and the way we take in information and respond to our environment. I am sure that each of us can recall a time when a family member saw us and asked with genuine concern 'what's the matter?' We may not have given a second thought to how anyone would know this without our having said a word. We communicated our state of mind in the way our shoulders drooped or in the crinkle of lines on our foreheads, or any of a myriad of other small changes in our behavior. Most of us are programmed to understand and respond to others at a subconscious level. The reassurance and relief we feel when someone notices our distress, or the happiness we feel when we share our joy, is part of life. It connects us to the people all around us every day. Or it can disconnect us when others fail to recognize our state of mind. We are often reminded that with smartphones and the internet we are connected. Well, I am here to say that we need to connect to each other in a very different way.

My purpose here is to help you connect with the importance of a program that is meant to build a bridge between these two kinds of minds. This is a two way street. We all need to recognize that there are many people out there that have a brain that is not wired to automatically navigate the sea of social information that surrounds us

and guides us through every minute of every day. Students who understand social information need to learn about and understand those who don't. And vice versa. We need to forge a path toward mutual understanding and we need to have the tools to be able to talk about social communication differences so that this understanding will occur.

I can unequivocally assure you that students who have difficulty comprehending social information are the very students who are marginalized and rejected by their peers in our schools and as young adults are being shut out of employment. And this continues to happen.

We cannot allow students to be rejected and marginalized by peers who do not understand the challenges faced by these very bright and capable students. These are our most promising students on the spectrum. They deserve so much better than we are providing them. And they deserve it now.

We know that ramps and automatic doors provide access for people with physical disabilities. The work that Catherine Hogan has started with Inclusion Teaming is that bridge that will connect young people who see and respond to social information in very different ways. It brings these very different minds together and opens the door to understanding one another by creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

It is well past time for us to build the bridge that will create access for those with an invisible disability. The means required to open doors to acceptance in school and the workplace are far more subtle and require the hard work of learning about one another. We can access one another to connect in a meaningful way. Let us do it now. Let us build that bridge.