

# Autism and Seeking a Place in an Adult World

**The Practice Round:** A year with Justin Canha, a young man with autism who is part of a new transition program to ready him for an independent life as an adult.

By AMY HARMON

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## Correction Appended

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — For weeks, Justin Canha, a high school student with autism, a love of cartoons and a gift for drawing, had rehearsed for the job interview at a local animation studio.

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As planned, he arrived that morning with a portfolio of his comic strips and charcoal sketches, some of which were sold through a Chelsea gallery. Kate Stanton-Paule, the teacher who had set up the meeting, accompanied him. But his first words upon entering the office were, like most things involving Justin, not in the script.

“Hello, everybody,” he announced, loud enough to be heard behind the company president’s door. “This is going to be my new job, and you are going to be my new friends.”

As the employees exchanged nervous glances that morning in January 2010, Ms. Stanton-Paule, the coordinator of a new kind of “transition to adulthood” program for special education students at Montclair High School, wondered if they were all in over their heads.

Justin, who barely spoke until he was 10, falls roughly in the middle of the spectrum of social impairments that characterize autism, which affects nearly one in 100 American children. He talks to himself in public, has had occasional angry outbursts, avoids eye contact and rarely deviates from his favorite subject, animation. [His unabashed expression of emotion and quirky sense of humor endear him to teachers, therapists and relatives.](#) Yet at 20, he had never made a true friend.

People with autism, whose unusual behaviors are

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Links to special features including short video conversations with Justin Canha and links to his artwork and animation can be found throughout the article.

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Tiny sketches of cartoon characters hint at the artistic potential of Justin Canha, 22. [More Photos »](#)

People with autism, whose unusual behaviors are believed to stem from variations in early brain development, typically disappear from public view after they leave school. As few as one in 10 hold even part-time jobs. Some live in state-supported group homes; even those who attend college often [end up unemployed and isolated](#), living with parents.

But Justin is among the first generation of autistic youths who have benefited throughout childhood from more effective therapies and hard-won educational opportunities. And Ms. Stanton-Paule's program here is based on the somewhat radical premise that with intensive coaching in the workplace and community — and some stretching by others to include them — students like Justin can achieve a level of lifelong independence that has eluded their predecessors.

“There’s a prevailing philosophy that certain people can never function in the community,” Ms. Stanton-Paule told skeptics. “I just don’t think that’s true.”

With some 200,000 autistic teenagers set to come of age in the United States over the next five years alone, little is known about their ability to participate fully in public life, or what it would take to accommodate them. Across the country, neighbors, employers, colleagues and strangers are warily interacting with young adults whose neurological condition many associate only with children.

Some [advocates of “neurodiversity”](#) call this the next civil rights frontier: society, they say, stands to benefit from accepting people whose brains work differently. Opening the workplace to people with autism could [harness their sometimes-unusual talents](#), advocates say, while [decreasing costs](#) to families and taxpayers for daytime aides and health care and housing subsidies, estimated at more than \$1 million [over an adult lifetime](#).

But such efforts carry their own costs. In this New York City suburb, the school district considered scrapping Ms. Stanton-Paule's program almost as soon as it began, to save money on the extra teaching assistants who accompanied students to internships, the bank, the gym, the grocery store. Businesses weighed the risks of hiring autistic students who might not automatically grasp standard rules of workplace behavior.

Oblivious to such debates, many autistic high school students are facing the adult world with elevated expectations of their own. Justin, who relied on a one-on-one aide in school, had by age 17 declared his intention to be a “famous animator-illustrator.” He also dreamed of living in his own apartment, a goal he seemed especially devoted to when, say, his mother asked him to walk the dog.

“I prefer I move to the apartment,” he would say, reluctantly setting aside the notebook he spent hours filling with tiny, precise replicas of every known animated character.

“I prefer I move to the apartment, too,” his father, Briant, a pharmaceutical company executive, replied on hard days.

Over the year that a New York Times reporter observed it, the transition program at Montclair High served as a kind of boot camp in community integration that might also be, for Justin, a last chance. Few such services are available after high school. And Justin was entitled to public education programs, by federal law, until only age 21.

Ms. Stanton-Paule had vowed to secure him a paid job before he left school — the best gauge, experts say, of whether a special needs student will maintain some autonomy later in life. She also hoped to help him forge the relationships, at work and beyond it, that form the basis of a full life.

**Correction: September 20, 2011**

*An earlier version of this story contained a misspelled name. It is Paloma Kalisch, not*

Kalish.

A version of this article appeared in print on September 18, 2011, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Autistic and Seeking a Place in an Adult World.

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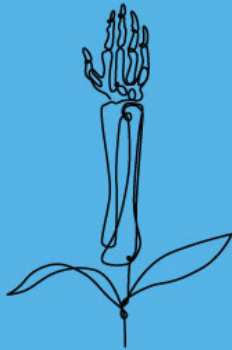
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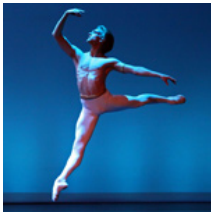
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