

Thank you for having me, thank you to the organizers of Future Quest, this is truly a great conference and it is awesome to be back.

Most of all I want to thank all of you, each and everyone one of you who are here today. I know how hard it is to be here, for many of you, your parents forced you to come, but your attendance shows courage – thank you. The themes I am going to talk about today are: support, awareness, acceptance and perseverance. Sitting here today is your first step in acceptance. Accepting the challenges we face is scary, and it takes courage - it takes support- it takes awareness, and it takes perseverance.

**PAUSE**

These are some of the themes I am going to talk about today, and I hope to shed a little light on how everyone can succeed if you push through the challenges we all are presented with.

Before I elaborate on these four themes, I would like to address a few myths, personal beliefs and facts that myself and many of you may have heard before.

**Through a quick Google search of “myths of people with disabilities” I came up with the following myths.**

**MYTH: People with disabilities are more comfortable with "their own kind."**

**Belief: “Normal” people won’t like us, we are weird etc.**

**Fact: We can hang out with whomever we want, all types of people like us regardless of our weaknesses**

**MYTH: The lives of people with disabilities are totally different than the lives of people without disabilities.**

**Belief: We are never going to be happy, we are not going to experience good times and we are a burden to our family and society.**

**Fact: We have friends, go to school, go to work, just like everyone else**

**MYTH: Curious children should never ask people about their disabilities.**

**Belief: We stand out in a crowd, people look at us  
strangely.**

**Fact: We would rather talk to people about our disability,  
so they understand our strengths and weaknesses.**

### **PAUSE**

Folks in order to dispel these societal myths and our own negative beliefs we need to put together a strong support team. These support teams can look very different depending on the person. There is no right or wrong way to receive support. A support team can be made up of a combination of individuals, services, medications and environments that contribute to helping one to succeed. EVERYONE needs support.

It is not easy to accept support -- It doesn't always feel good to accept support - I understand that, but it is critical to have people that serve as a sounding board for you to help you express and process your feelings and frustrations. To overcome the challenges that we face -- We need a team. My support team is what got me through, it's what got me through each and every challenge and it is what continues to get me through the challenges I face today. When I talk about support I am not necessarily talking about traditional support such as, therapy and experts in the field of whatever specific challenge you are facing. Because those people aren't always right. I have had my own personal experiences with this; I have seen many so called professionals who were not right about me at all; including a math teacher who said, "She didn't care that I had a disability", the 7<sup>th</sup> grade administrator who told my mother that he she had more important things to deal with than Andrew Feldman, and a special education department that

believed I was spoiled and had behavioral issues rather than special needs. Nonetheless, I had to keep looking for the correct support to have on my team. You have to find the support team that works for you -- but YOU HAVE TO FIND IT because I know what happens when you don't find it or you cant' find it.

## **PAUSE**

I felt all alone, I felt like there was nowhere to go and sometimes I asked myself what was the purpose of living. Let me tell you about a time that I felt truly alone, frightened and I didn't know what to do. It was the summer before fifth grade, (it was so traumatizing that) I remember this like it was yesterday. This was before any diagnosis of a disability, before an IEP/before medication. I went to overnight camp for the summer in Maine (like many kids do on the east coast.)

Following this experience my world was forever changed. I didn't fit in at camp. For the whole four plus weeks that I was there I was tremendously anxious, I was panicky, I didn't have friends, I didn't have a phone or opportunity to speak with my parents. I didn't know what to do. I felt trapped, I felt alone and I didn't understand why I was feeling the way I was or what was happening to me. I didn't know how I was going to get out, and I didn't have any answers. I didn't have any support, when I told the counselors I couldn't sleep they told me that there was nothing that they could do and said that I had to deal with it myself. This of course only made me more frightened. I felt helpless and had no idea how to help myself. I remember telling the director of the camp that the best birthday present (my birthday is in July) I could get was to go home. In fact, I did go home a couple days after parents' visiting day.

After that camp experience things were never the same. I was in a constant panic, terrified to return to school and no one including my parents knew what the answer was. My parents started to seek support to try and understand what was going on. Why was I so anxious - What was the problem. Why were these feelings of being alone, that feeling of being scared of not knowing how I would make it to the next day - persisting. Finally we connected with a psychiatrist who began to suspect that something was going on with me more than simple anxiety.

## **PAUSE**

That feeling of being alone and scared is the exact reason why it is not only "okay" but so necessary that you seek support for yourself and those who care about you.

## **PAUSE**

My support has come in all shapes and sizes –

from different ways

from different people

from different areas of my life

from different times in my life

from different professions, and

with different motivations.

And my support network is always changing and evolving.

One of the biggest supports for me going through middle school and high school was the owner of a baseball card shop in my town. He took me in, he gave me confidence, when I was teased in the parking lot or on the football field for not catching a pass or when my parents told me they were separating, he was there to say come on back here and help the customers --

we would talk about what happened and then I would get distracted with helping out at the store and I felt important and that I had a place to belong, that was one of the first significant memories I have of feeling supported and the role it served in getting me through many days and months -- That being said I came to realize that my parents have been the greatest support I could have ever asked for, I was very lucky to have these people who I could call up 24/7 whenever I needed it. Just like the President has his national security team that he counts on at all hours it is important that you have people who serve this same role in your life. For me it happened to be my parents but it doesn't have to be as long as the support is always available to you. We put together a team and you need to put together a team too. My parents were there at 3 in the morning (and still are) to help me process through my feelings and thoughts or simply provide reassurance that everything would be all right. As time passed the team of support grew to other individuals

that I trusted and grew to rely on in the same way. (Although not at three in the morning)

## **PAUSE**

One area of support came in the form of medication, although it is not the case for everyone, medication can play a crucial role in providing additional support. For the longest time I didn't want to take medication, I didn't want some outside "fix" to make me feel better. It made me feel that I would have failed if I gave in to taking this support because I wanted to do it all alone. I admit that I felt like I had something to prove to everybody and I wanted to do it MYSELF without the help of medication, but I now know that the medication is part of my support team. For me, coming to terms with taking medication was an act of accepting support. Ativan is a major support that I keep with me at all times. I no longer rely on it as I used to –

to deal with anxiety, but simply knowing it is there allows me to feel more confident that I can handle whatever comes my way. I would like to emphasize that medication is only one very small piece of the puzzle it IS NOT THE SOLUTION. There is no silver bullet just a bunch of puzzle pieces working to fit together. Medication can't rewire the brain or do the work of understanding ourselves; it helps us do that work, it simply reduces the impact that our emotions may have in allowing this process to happen.

## **PAUSE**

The existence of a support team was the only way I had any chance of making it through each and every day with its unexpected, confusing and painful challenges. As I stand up here and stress support it is important to note that I was not always willing or interested in taking this support and because

of that I made the journey much more difficult than it already was. So that is why I am telling you TAKE the support early, and take it OFTEN. You must figure out what type of support you need and what type of support works for YOU.

## **PAUSE**

At the age of fifteen I met with one of the leading experts on Asperger's Syndrome and he told my parents after three visits with me that "they should not expect anything more from me after high school than possibly a technical school." Is this the type of support we need -- ABSOLUTELEY NOT -- because if you surround yourself with people who don't believe in you, and don't believe in your undiscovered potential, how could you ever believe in yourself. Although it took many failed attempts and frustrating experiences I now know what the right support team feels like and how to continue to expand it.

It has become made up of family, friends, coworkers and professionals. Knowing that I have access to a support team from the time I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night, and if I wake up in the middle of the night, allows me to push on to the next good moment or the next challenge. The number of players on the team may be smaller or larger at one particular time, but the role of the team is always the same -- a constant presence that I know I can turn to. The faces may change but the NEED does not. No matter what you have been told or what you currently believe, or what societal myths say, the FACT is that each and every one of us CAN ACHIEVE WHAT WE SET OUT TO ACCOMPLISH with that support team in place.

## **PAUSE**

Part of the process for me in accepting support and developing a support team was a growing awareness of myself. Through

the help of my support team I began to explore my strengths and weaknesses -- The things that came easily to me and more importantly the things that I struggled with. As difficult as accepting support was, the task of becoming aware of my needs and challenges, was many times harder.

## **PAUSE**

I didn't want to become aware that I had a disability, that I had challenges, I fought it over and over again, I had a diagnosed "label" Aspergers Syndrome and I didn't want that label and I didn't want to believe it. As a result, I wasn't interested in becoming aware of what this meant, I didn't want to talk about it, I was essentially in a stage of denial and believed that my challenges were the result of everyone else's behavior. I wanted no involvement in changing myself, just getting people to change towards me. For a long time it was difficult for me to

become aware of my strengths and weaknesses because I didn't want to have a permanent label that I couldn't throw away. I believed that it wasn't fair, I was very angry, and I consistently asked "why me", I was even jealous of my brothers who didn't have a diagnosed disability and were "normal". My parents even tried to help in this process by saying we weren't going to refer to my struggles as "Aspergers" -- I would not budge, it didn't matter to me what they called it, it was too late, I had already been given the label, I knew I was different and I was furious.

## **PAUSE**

My willingness to become more aware of myself, my emotions, my behaviors, and my thinking did come –slowly – but it was not before many days and months of emotional turmoil. My friends continued to leave, my confusion continued, I often

found myself crying and in constant fights with my family and even threats of suicide. As my awareness grew we began to problem solve situations as they arose to make them more manageable. To illustrate this point, attending family functions was difficult for me because of all the interactions, expectations, length of time involved, as well as the fact that I felt judged and uncomfortable. Inevitably during these events I would fall apart at some point creating a great deal of stress for my family as well as a lot of embarrassment and discomfort for me. My parents figured out that if we simply took an extra car to the event it would be possible for me to enjoy the gathering for as long as I was able and leave without creating a scene and altering the plans for everyone. Eventually, I took my own car in such situations. My parents and I needed to know that I had a way out if I was getting overwhelmed – having this increased awareness of what my needs were had little to do with acceptance or happiness, I resented the accommodations that

had to be made, I was often embarrassed and frequently angry, depressed and overall pissed off that this is what I had to deal with and nobody else did.

## **PAUSE**

But the reality was that these accommodations had to be made, whether I liked it or not, so I could move forward, so I could learn and grow. The most obvious time that my awareness became crystal clear to me was when I refused to go to my town's public schools for 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

## **PAUSE**

This leads me to how I came to accept my disability and began to accept myself as well.

In spite of my new found awareness, when I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade the moment came where I was faced with the choice of whether to accept the reality of the situation or keep working against myself, fighting going to social groups, fighting at home, and facing constant disappointments in reaching my goals.

One day I had just had enough, I got home from school and started to cry and yell in my bedroom venting my frustration. I had enough. I didn't want to keep on fighting through the challenges anymore, I remember saying "it is too hard". My mother came over to comfort me, but this comfort turned into a very blunt, but loving conversation about the crossroads I was at and what my choices were. My mom said to me, "Andrew you can spend the rest of your life playing the victim and feeling sorry for yourself and I will love you just the same, but I guarantee you that very few people, including teachers, employees and friends will truly give a shit that you have Aspergers. You have a choice you can continue to cry and

scream about how miserable your life is or you can pick yourself up embrace your strengths and deal with your weakness, like we all have to.”

## **PAUSE**

Over the next few weeks I noticed things changing, I was slowing beginning the process of acceptance. I noticed I was no longer hiding in the back room of the special-ed classroom, so the mainstream kids wouldn't see me from the window -- I was now introducing my friends from the mainstream classes I took to my support team in special-ed. Acceptance felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, I had been spending so much energy denying the truth about who I was and fighting against people who truly wanted to help me and accepted all of me. Now without this burden I felt a newfound energy- a passion to achieve my goals and overcome every challenge in

front of me. I began to implement my own strategies to deal with the things I struggled with, I took tools from the social groups I sat in for years, that I had previously ignored, as well as created new ideas and beliefs – I want to remind you that this is a process, there are good days and bad days. I came to understand that everyone faces challenges and struggles with something from academics to athletics to relationships, and I began to realize that many of the students in that special-ed program had challenges that were far greater than mine. I began to explain my difficulties to a select group of people in my life.

## **PAUSE**

I like to say that our brain is like a hard drive of a computer, some come fully loaded -- mine did not. The great thing about hard drives is you can add files to them. There were several

areas of my computer that didn't have the programs installed to understand certain things, that came naturally to others – most significantly non-verbal communication and social skills. Through experiences over the years I have been able to create these files and I continue to create them each day. Each time I face a situation, in which I do not possess natural ability I am now able to search through these files for effective strategies and information to be successful, and then based on that experience create a new file. It sounds daunting, but that is the way I can learn the things that come more naturally to others. Another challenge for you is figuring out how you can create the files that may be missing from the hard drive.

## **PAUSE**

Having come to this point of acceptance the greatest regret I have is not having gotten here sooner. I encourage all of you to

accept your challenges and tackle them head on as soon as possible. It makes getting to the other side so much easier, acceptance allows you to see your strengths and really feel good about your accomplishments. For many years, I would accomplish great things, whether it was getting a good grade on a test, getting my drivers license, or interviewing a cool guest on my public access tv show – but I would never really feel proud of myself, I wouldn't feel good, and I would always ask, I know this is a good thing, but why don't I feel good? It was because I was letting those negative beliefs get me down. Acceptance allowed me to start feeling joy around the things I had accomplished, and that is truly a good feeling.

You know what acceptance also allowed me to do? It allowed me to recognize that even though there were many people that judged me and didn't want to hang out with me, in the end, it was their loss. I now know the good things about me and I feel more secure and comfortable in the friendships I have.

Acceptance is hard, but a lot of good comes from it, so please if you take anything from this talk, accept yourself, all of yourself, your strengths and your weaknesses early.

## **PAUSE**

It is important that I don't come across as if this is a simple or smooth process, although I was aware of my challenges, had a support team and came to a place of acceptance there were and still are periods in which new situations have to be tackled and processed, problems solved, and new skills have that to be developed.

Applying to college I had to take a hard look at the schools that would allow me the best opportunity to succeed, especially the type of support they offered for someone with special needs, once again I had to deal with my emotions of embarrassment,

sadness, and frustration that it wasn't a simple process. Going to college presented new challenges – developing independent living skills, addressing new social situations, needing to take the initiative to get support. In college if you don't do it- it doesn't happen.

In spite of my successes in college, I was shocked to find that the uncertainty and lack of structure following my graduation caused me to regress into many of the old negative beliefs and difficult emotions it seemed were far behind me. Even though I knew I was headed into a major transition from school to work, I knew that transitions small and large are unsettling, that knowledge alone was not enough to avoid difficult times.

During the summer after graduation, I had to re-examine my support network and identify new support for the phase of my life I was headed toward.

Thankfully, over a few months, my parents and I were able to problem solve, and I created that new support team to get me back on my feet.

## **PAUSE**

As many of you may know. I have a degree from GW in political communications, and it wasn't long before I began a professional career in politics. Like others, I tried to find opportunities that would get me some experience and my foot in the door. I began working for the White House, flying around the country setting up events as part of the Vice President's advance team. I then landed a senior staff position on now Congressman John Delaney's successful congressional campaign. One year ago, I formed my own business and it is off to a good start – a lot of this feels like a dream, but it is real and I did it and you can do it also.

I have talked about a lot of tough things today, a lot of emotional topics and stories – when I was writing this speech I found myself saying to myself, wow how did I do this. In my life there have been a lot of times when I and many people thought I was down for the count, but I kept on getting back up and I kept on pushing through. I got back up after that camp experience, I got back up after constant teasing and bullying, I got back up after that 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher told me she didn't care that I had a disability, I got back up after I was told I wouldn't be able to go to college, I got back up when during freshman year of college this kid across the hall from me started a fight with me because "I was just a retard with Aspergers". In short, to overcome your challenges it takes perseverance, to get through each one of the stages I have talked about it take perseverance.

## **PAUSE**

I have never given up, nor has my support team (I and they may have wanted to), but even at my lowest point I have got back up and found solutions to my challenges. The only way you can do this is with perseverance and with the belief (even if it is in the way back of your head) that you will overcome the next challenge that comes your way. Some of you may ask why? Why would I want to keep on going, and keep on fighting? The answer for me is, and I am not going to lie about it, it feels good to look back and see all the people who doubted you and now compliment you. If you have ever said "I told you so"- you know what I mean.

All of us can make a difference, all of us can dispel the myths, and we have been given the task of doing so. The question is

will we accept and conquer that task or will we let it conquer us.

Each of you attending today have your own dreams and goals for your future. Many of you may be struggling with negative emotions, and thoughts and beliefs about your ability to succeed. If I can leave youi with one lasting message it is -do not doubt yourself. It is through the process of finding support, awareness of your needs, acceptance of your challenges, and a good dose of perseverance that will get you through to the next day and the other side.

I would like to close by sharing with you a painful quote that was said about me by an expert in the field regarding his perception of me at 15 years old. "Your son is a tormented soul: It is as if he is trapped under a sheet of ice, he can see the world above it, but can't find his way through." Nine years

later what I would like to share with him and all of you is that whatever he believed of me at that time couldn't be further from the truth today. Today, I am a passionate, optimistic, and successful soul, who with great determination broke through that sheet of ice. You can do that too. Our potential can only be limited by our beliefs. Don't let that happen.