



GAME CHANGE: The I CAN Network Story

World Autism Awareness Day 2015

“When inspired individuals come together and take control of the issues and challenges that matter most to them - that’s when you get deep change that lasts. I CAN is still young, still evolving, but already taking the shape as a purposeful, authentic and action-oriented community’

- Rev. Tim Costello, CEO World Vision Australia

My Choices: 'I can't' or 'I CAN'

By Tim Chan, Ambassador, I CAN Network

*When I see myself as autistic, with no voice to give legitimacy to my thoughts and feelings,
I think 'I can't'.*

*However, I can also see myself as autistic, without speech, but blessed with different abilities,
And I think 'I CAN'.*

*I picture myself as a child, helpless, requiring care and supervision, feeling lost and needy, overwhelmed
by numerous difficulties, unceasing demands,
And I lost hope.*

*Yet, I can choose to see a child, embraced by a loving family, playing a vital role as a son and brother,
And I feel 'I CAN'.*

*In a non-comprehending world, in which I am an alien, a social misfit with no friends,
I believe 'I can't'.*

*But when I choose to see myself as a frontier swagman, helped by the like-minded, forging a road less
travelled,
I believe 'I CAN'.*

*I am going to see me as a person, guided by inner purpose, with the resources to fulfill my needs and
dreams,
And I realize 'I CAN' live the life I dream of.*

What is I CAN Network?

We can all be part of a young person's 'I CAN' network. I CAN Network is a movement of young Australians driving a rethink of Autism, from 'I Can't' to 'I CAN'. We are building a confident 'I Can' attitude in the hearts and minds of young Australians on the spectrum and inspiring their peers with the 'awe' in Awetism. We achieve this through mentoring, child rights education, advocacy and fundraising in partnership with individuals, schools, tertiary organisations, community and government agencies

Find out more:

- Join us: Contact hello@icannetwork.com.au
- Hear our stories: www.facebook.com/groups/icannetwork.au
- Read our words: www.icannetwork.com.au/grapevine
- Listen to our talks: www.youtube.com/TheICanNetwork

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Editorial: Broken Shackles

'History is a continuous cycle of 'I Can' beating 'I Can't'

- Max Williams



The most dangerous limitations are the ones we set for ourselves. We tend to trust ourselves more than we trust others, so we're more inclined to accept self-imposed shackles than those thrust on us by others. Often, we do it to shield ourselves from disappointment.

Throughout my life, I told myself I couldn't do things. At 15, I told myself I would never be able to move away from home, because just going on a 5-day school camp was an incredibly stressful ordeal. When I was 18, I told myself I would never be able to go to University, because my High School scores weren't that crash hot, and moving to the city by myself seemed insurmountably terrifying. When I was 22, I told myself that because I'd never had a girlfriend, I never would, and I'd be doomed to a life of lonely celibacy, unwanted and unloved, because I simply wasn't good enough to be boyfriend material.

Today, I live 5 hours drive away from my parents, and I haven't lived with them permanently for 6 years. I've completed a Bachelor degree in sociology and a Postgrad in journalism. And at 23, I met a kind, funny, beautiful and brilliant woman who, for 19 wonderful months, was my girlfriend, and remains a close friend to this day.

As I look behind me at this trail of broken shackles, I have learned my lesson.

Max Williams (BA, La Trobe University) Blog: www.japanmax89.wordpress.com
Editor-in-Chief, I CAN Network and 26-year-old on the Autism Spectrum



Game Change

How a TEDxTalk becomes a movement: A message from Chris Varney, I CAN's Founder

'The rigour, deep care, entrepreneurship, determination and pure chutzpah displayed in this initiative is extraordinary. This work is important!'

- Jan Owen AM, CEO Foundation for Young Australians

You are reading the first I CAN Network report for April 2nd's World Autism Awareness Day. We plan on publishing this report every year as a report card on our progress with empowering young people on the Autism Spectrum, starting in Australia and later overseas.

As a report, Game Change will showcase I CAN Network's emerging practice across schools, tertiary institutions and in the community. We are the game change. Nowhere else in the world is there a movement of young people, representing the full spectrum, who are designing and delivering mentoring, advocacy, child rights education and fundraising, for and with young people on the spectrum.

Young people on the spectrum are an asset: they offer focus, attention to detail, memory retention and visual/ linguistic perception that can be an advantage to economies. I CAN Network desperately wants to connect more of our young people to the labour market so that Australia benefits from more than just 42% of people with Autism in employment.

Our movement came about by accident. I never imagined my TEDx 'Autism – How My Unstoppable Mother Proved the Experts Wrong' would receive the response it did. People from all over the world write to me every week saying how my Mum, Lisa, has inspired them. After giving the talk on my Asperger's, I felt a vocation to commit myself to the potential of young people on the Autism Spectrum. I expressed that through a vision for a network that was widespread and powerful enough to fill every young person on the spectrum, and with other neuron differences, with an 'I Can' attitude.

The first followers of this vision were James Ong and Penny Robinson, both successful graduates on the spectrum. As three conspirators, we designed the main architecture for I CAN Network. We're proud to be humble contributors to a much bigger team of young people and professionals today.

As a movement, I CAN Network is the sum of many networks at the centre of which is a young person on the spectrum who is supported by their family, friends, educators and peers to say 'I Can'. This makes our vision statement the following:

'Young people saying 'I Can' to their challenges and opportunities'

Every kid or young person, regardless of whether they're on the spectrum or not, needs a network of people that empowers them to be positive, play to their strengths and gives them permission to



think 'I Can', even when everything around them makes them think 'I Can't'. My network started with my parents and grandparents. They modelled a 'quiet magic' that my teachers and my friends Erin, Tim and Anthony made their own. Everyone in I CAN Network can point to similar networks. This makes our mission statement the following:

To inspire 'I Can' networks around young people with challenges'

We translate our vision and mission into four pillars that direct everything that we do:

1. 'I CAN Achieve' – mentoring children, adolescents and young adults on the spectrum
2. 'I CAN Enable, Not Label' – building the capacity of educators of young people on the spectrum
3. 'I CAN Create Change' – advocacy that drives a rethink of Autism, from 'I Can't' to 'I CAN'
4. 'I CAN Invest in Talent' – talent development of young people and fundraising for I CAN Network

Our secret weapon as an organisation is our diverse team. We are a team for all types. You do not have to be on the spectrum. We are a team for students, stigma-busters, campaigners and innovators. Many in our team are on the spectrum. Young people on the spectrum are naturally entrepreneurial. They do not 'go along with the crowd' or 'fit in a box'. Their participation is always authentic. When they have the right structures in place for their strengths, they make the intangibles, tangible. We invite you to support our team's work by making a donation via www.chuffed.org/project/ican.

There are so many people I would like to thank for making I CAN Network's achievements possible. Thank you to our Tim Chan for championing I CAN for young people with severe Autism. Thank you to the wider I CAN team led by 'Core Enabler's' Gabrielle, Penny, James, Jackie, Damien, Christian, Will and Max – it's the right time for I CAN Network and we're giving hope to a whole generation on the spectrum. Thank you to our schools, tertiary organisations, partner organisations including Doxa, Foundation for Young Australians, UN Youth, Aspergers Victoria and Amaze Victoria. Thank you to Rebecca Jackson for her sketches throughout this report.

On a personal level, can I thank my terrific family and friends! In particular, I'd like to thank Sarah Muling for designing this report; my late grandfather Bob Anderson who is responsible for my inner rod of 'I Can' determination and my late teacher Christine Horvath who showed me what an education revolution can look like.

Be part of this! We're the disruption we've been waiting for.

Chris Varney (BA, LLB, Monash University)
Chief Enabling Officer, I CAN Network and 27-year-old on the Autism Spectrum

Our Team

A message from Gabrielle Breheny, Assistant Director, I CAN Network



- Established a 9 member leadership team, 7 of whom are on the spectrum
- Established a broader support team of 60 people
- Created a set of 'I CAN norms' to drive our culture across all our networks

The 'I Can' message is something that means an immense amount to me. My younger brother of three years was diagnosed with Autism when he was about six-years-old. This has had an enormous impact on my life. I wish I could write a wonderful story of how having Autism enabled my brother and those around him to see the positives in him; to embrace his individual quirks and to accept him for who he was. But my story is quite the opposite. I fear many people's stories are quite similar.

Being close to my brother in age and attending the same school, I witnessed him being bullied at school nearly every day. There was absolutely nothing I could do about it. This did not stop at primary school – we ended up going on the same bus to high school every day. Again I would witness it a few metres away nearly every day. I would intervene, of course, but trust me, there is very little an older sister can do to stop bullies that thrive on that attention from authorities anyway. This angered me.

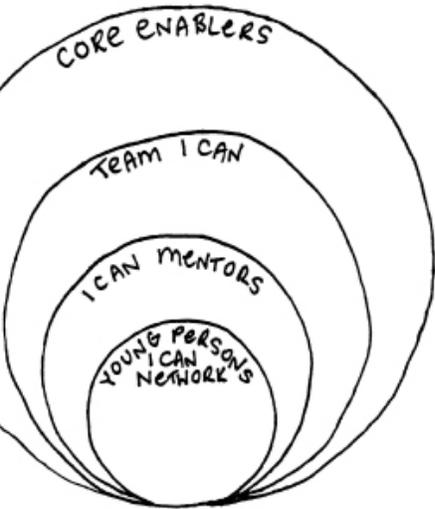
It wasn't until the end of 2013 when I heard Chris Varney speak about I CAN Network that I realised I could channel that anger into passion and begin to work on something with that passion and make a difference.

I joined the I CAN team because like many other siblings, parents and friends, I didn't want to see other kids out there, just like my brother, bullied because of who they are. I want them to participate in a world that accepts their differences or whatever quirks they may have, that sees their abilities, not just their deficits or their label. Most of all I want those on the Autism Spectrum themselves to realise that they are capable of doing amazing things with their lives, no matter what anyone else says or thinks, and I believe that our programs like our mentoring program, I CAN Schools and tertiary programs and I CAN Camps are achieving just that.

With I CAN, I have witnessed firsthand, in a space of less than 24 hours, kids on the Autism Spectrum transform from being in a place of self-doubt to a place of self-confidence. Nothing can touch them. No one can tell them that they can't do something. If that isn't evidence of some amazing things taking place, I don't know what is!

Team 'I CAN'

We achieve this transformation through our team of individuals on the spectrum/ or passionate about the spectrum. I guarantee you will never meet a more eclectic, diverse, talented group of people in your life than in Team 'I CAN'. What sets this team apart is that of our 60 people, the majority of us are on the spectrum. We place our young people and their 'I Can' networks at the centre of our thinking.



We hold everyone in I CAN Network accountable to the following norms that drive our culture:

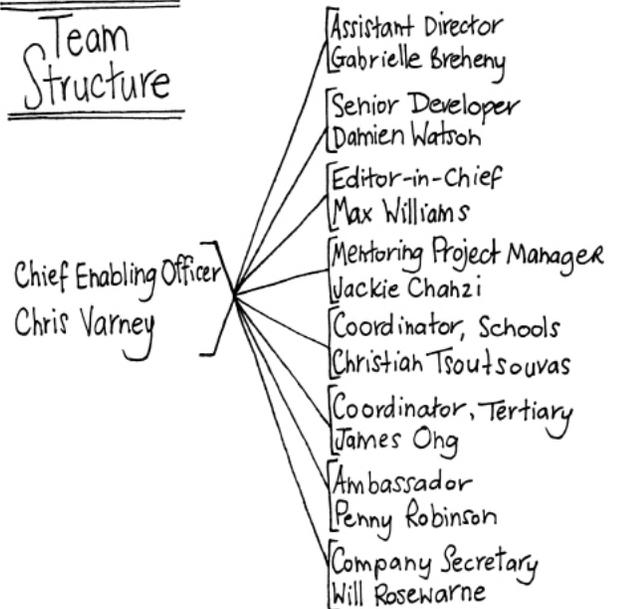
- We are positive*
- We see strengths*
- We enable, not label*
- We are learners*
- We are brave*
- We are diverse*
- We respect rights and responsibilities*
- We are open*

Our wider team is supported by a nine-member leadership group called the 'Core Enabler's'

Everyone in I CAN Network is currently a volunteer! We bring together our volunteer team weekly where we rotate a focus on our different mentoring, education, advocacy and fund-raising projects.

Join our team! It's open to anyone, you don't have to be on the spectrum. The experience has had a profound impact on me. I tracked down my first ever application to be a part of I CAN Network. In it I wrote: 'In Chris I see a very 'I Can' attitude towards life, whereas with my younger brother, I fear I find it difficult sometimes to see that in him, no matter how amazing he is'. That sentence no longer holds true. I have learned to see my brother in a totally different way – I see him with his strengths, his talents, and his abilities, not his deficits or his weaknesses. I can only hope that I CAN Network continues to have that same effect on others as well.

Team Structure



Support Team I CAN

- Support I CAN: www.chuffed.org/project/ican
- Join our team: www.icannetwork.com.au/2015/02/16/were-recruiting/

'I CAN' Enable, Not Label.

We see a person on the spectrum as an individual, not a diagnosis

'I CAN' Achieve.

We believe in empowering ourselves and others to say 'I CAN'

Our 'culture of mentoring' across our Pilot Schools and Tertiary Programs

Key achievements:

- 100 young Australians on the Autism Spectrum involved in I CAN's mentoring
- Established 3 students networks across Monash, University of Melbourne & Deakin (Vic)
- Established mentoring pilot programs at 3 schools including Marymede Catholic College, Northern School for Autism (Senior Campus) and St. Bernadette's Catholic Primary School
- Delivered 3 camps for 54 young adults (25-27 April 2014; 13-15 March 2015) and 30 teenagers (10-12 October 2014), all run by and for young people on the spectrum
- Winner, 2014 Monash University Vice-Chancellor's Social Inclusion Award
- Finalist, 2014 Victorian Disability Sector Awards
- Finalist, 2014 Mentor of the Year
- Delivered 24 'I CAN' presentations to schools and tertiary institutions

We want to revolutionise the way young Australians on the spectrum are understood and valued in education. We see young Australians on the spectrum as an incredible resource for their primary schools, secondary schools and tertiary/ training institutions. Currently the systems around these young people do not know how to harness them. An alarming 86% of students on the spectrum report facing 'difficulties' in school; only 19% of people diagnosed as being on the spectrum gain a post-school qualification (ABS, 2012). We want to work intensively with a range of schools and tertiary bodies to demonstrate innovation in the learning experience of our young people.

We are partnering with educational bodies in a holistic way to achieve these demonstrations. Our target audience are the educators, parents and, in particular, the peers of young people on the spectrum. Success looks like inspiring these individuals to think 'I can enable, not label' young people on the spectrum.

One of our key assets to achieve this attitudinal change are young people on the spectrum themselves. We want to influence the positive formation of our young people so that they have purpose, belonging, skills, confidence and resilience. Success looks like moving children, adolescents and young adults on the spectrum to a mindset of 'I can achieve'. Tim Chan has helped us to deconstruct this 'movement' into five steps which we have embedded into our programs.

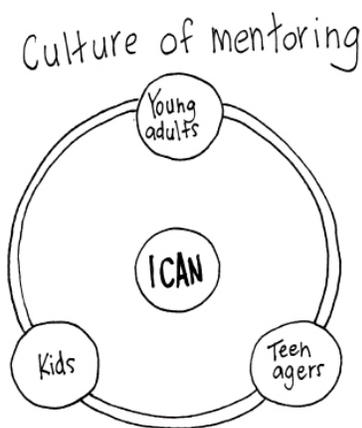
Five steps to saying 'I CAN':

1. Be clear about what you want and let people know
2. Believe in yourself and your goal
3. Be persistent
4. Be positive, get back on track after setbacks
5. Be confident, use each achievement as a reference point for your next challenge

I CAN's culture of mentoring

In its simplest form, a young person's 'I Can' network is a group of mentors that 'walk with' a young person on the spectrum and support them to achieve the above five steps. We empower our young people to be part of each other's networks. In doing so, we drive a 'culture of mentoring' across our youth community. We support this culture with mentor training which includes content informed by our personal experiences from being mentored and mentoring others.

Our 'culture of mentoring' has three rungs to support critical life transitions, i.e. primary to secondary, secondary to tertiary and tertiary to employment participation.



Mentoring young adults

Professionals mentoring I CAN's team of young adult mentors

Mentoring teenagers

Young adults connected to the spectrum mentoring teenagers

Mentoring kids

Young adults and teenagers connected to the spectrum mentoring 9-13-year-olds

We tailor our mentoring to the individual. We have learnt that some young people prefer to benefit from a mentor in the setting of a team, support group or camp before they develop a one-on-one mentoring relationship. Our mentoring is also adaptive to the context, i.e.

school or tertiary setting. All of our mentoring is driving towards the below outcomes:

1. Increasing the time spent by a young person on the spectrum in voluntary social activities
2. Increasing the time spent by a young person on the spectrum in voluntary extra-curricular activities
3. Increasing the no. of young people who feel safe, confident and supported to disclose their Autism

Camp Mentoring: I CAN Camps

Our 'culture of mentoring' comes to life through I CAN Network's Camps. These gatherings, run for teens (14-18-year-olds) and young adults (18-30-year-olds), are the apex of a young person's experience with I CAN Network. Their purpose is to build the confidence of participants and help facilitate the development of their own 'I Can' network. Currently they're held at Doxa Youth Foundation's camp in Malmsbury, Victoria and have started attracting interstate participants.

'I CAN Network's camps are actively supported by Doxa and we have witnessed the extraordinary outcomes achieved by the I CAN participants and leadership team'

- Daniel Findley, CEO, Doxa Youth Foundation

Participants have said that the camps are transformational simply because they bring together a group of young people who so strongly relate to each other's strengths, quirks and challenges.

The camps place an emphasis on fun, facilitating community, self-expression, confidence and communication skills, and empowerment.

• Fun

The camps CELEBRATE the Autism Spectrum and who each participant is. We run a 'Dress to Obsess' night where participants can don their obsessions in all their varieties!

• Building community

Participants are placed in small groups where they're mentored by two 'Camp Mentors' who are either on the spectrum or passionate about the spectrum. Mentors, who are trained in I CAN's S.O.L.V.E method, support their participants through group discussions, debriefs, games, outdoor activities and team challenges.



• Self-expression, confidence and communication skills

Our team supports each participant to express what an 'I Can' self-belief means to them through writing, art, construction, performance and music. This process moves participants to share their own story via creative outlets. We then give participants the option to share their story as an 'I Can Talk' to the whole camp. Young people who are non-verbal have delivered these talks through typing. These 'I Can Talks' provide uplifting moments for all participants where they hear each other's strengths, quirks and what they're going to say 'I Can' to.

'Camp gave people on the Autism Spectrum an opportunity to learn about their strengths and realise that Autism can be used as a strength'

- Daniel Giles, I CAN Ambassador

• Empowerment

We aim for everyone to leave the camp with an action plan. The program moves participants towards identifying what they're going to say 'I Can' to and encourages them to use each other for their individual 'I Can' networks. The connections forged help participants translate their confidence into their everyday lives. Our team offers follow-up reunions and mentor training so that participants remain connected.

'The camp clearly changes each of those who are lucky enough to participate. The work you are all doing will inspire so many young lives and is so needed in our community'

- Judy Brewer, Chair of the Autism Cooperative Research Centre

I CAN's Tertiary Program

The first I CAN young adults camp (April 2014) fuelled the setup of three student networks across Monash University, University of Melbourne and Deakin University. This was a very strategic play by I CAN Network. We believe there are the right conditions for young people on the spectrum to make significant inroads for Australians with Autism over the next 10 years.

'Co-leading I CAN's Monash Autistic Collective has shown me that a network in a university is possible if one is prepared to work hard for it'

- James Ong, Coordinator Tertiary Program

Any tertiary student on the spectrum can use I CAN Network's stories to form their own I CAN Network. The focus of I CAN's team is on building some demonstrations of community leadership by young people on the spectrum. There are two facets to this work.

The first involves actually building a youth movement across tertiary institutions to drive a public re-think of Autism. Each of our networks have made a start on this work by running student gatherings, advocacy activities and developing relationships with student unions and disability liaison units. The deeper intent behind this work has been to develop self-awareness and enterprising skills in tertiary students so they pursue meaningful employment and Australia benefits from more than just 42% of people with Autism in its labour force. Our implementation of this work at Monash University was recognised with the Vice-Chancellor's 2014 Social Inclusion Award.

'I CAN Network is inspiring and uplifting in the way that it unlocks the potential of people on the Autism Spectrum'

- Professor David Copolov OAM, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Monash University

The second facet involves sending tertiary students into secondary and primary schools as I CAN mentors to raise the self-esteem and aspirations of teenagers and kids on the spectrum. We hope this mentoring will help see more than just 19% of people on the spectrum gain a post-school qualification.



I CAN's Pilot Schools Initiative

Tertiary students and graduates from I CAN Network started delivering an 'I CAN Pilot Schools' initiative for primary and secondary schools in May 2014. We felt there was a burning need for innovation in working with students on the spectrum given that 86% of them report facing 'difficulties' in school. Our intent with the pilot has been to pioneer a new practice in (1) raising the self-esteem of students on the spectrum and (2) positioning them for success, on a social/emotional level, within the school community. Thus far Victorian schools including Marymede Catholic College, Northern School for Autism and St. Bernadette's Primary School have participated in the pilot. Several more schools will come on board after June.

'I CAN Network is actively assisting us to prepare our senior students for life beyond school. We have had an 'I Can' exhibition by the students, students have attended an 'I Can' camp and now we're working together to strengthen students voice'

- Anna Rigoni, Principal Northern School for Autism (Vic)

The concept of an 'I CAN School' is aspirational. It reimagines a school as a learning environment where all students, parents and staff contribute to the 'I Can' attitudes of each other. Success looks like a school becoming an 'I Can zone' for all its students. We hope to realise this vision through our 'special sauce' – our unique method called 'quiet magic'.

Quiet magic

'Quiet magic' involves working in the background to enable, not label students on the spectrum. This can look like making subtle adjustments and creating structures that play to students' strengths and empower them to 'create their own label' within the school community.

I CAN mentors build the capacity of principals, parents, teachers and students to practice 'quiet magic' on a day-to-day basis. We have found that combined action by these stakeholders can help influence cultural change within staff and student bodies.

'The 'I CAN' quiet magic is weaving its way around Marymede Catholic College. Parents, teachers and college student services staff have all made comments on the growing self-confidence of our young people'

- Julia Wake, Head of Secondary School, Marymede Catholic College

Our capacity-building of these stakeholders looks like the following:

• Principals and staff leadership teams

We work with principals and staff leadership teams to understand the strengths and challenges of their school community and identify strategies based on our lived experience. These strategies include opportunities for the principal and leaders to show support and learn from students on the spectrum.

• Teachers

In our pilots we speak with teacher and staff bodies at a range of levels. We involve teachers coordinating careers education, student wellbeing and special needs education in the design. We also deliver whole-of-staff presentations on our lived experience of Autism and what 'quiet magic' can look like on a case-by-case basis.

• Student leaders

Student leaders, including captains and prefects, are well positioned to influence student attitudes and culture within a school. We engage student leadership groups in a conversation around creating platforms, within their respective areas of responsibility, for students on the spectrum to become more visible and connected in school life.

• Peers of students on the spectrum

We deliver talks at student assemblies on our personal stories to educate them on the strengths and quirks of Autism. One of the themes to these talks is promoting our collective rights and responsibilities to each other, as outlined in UN instruments.

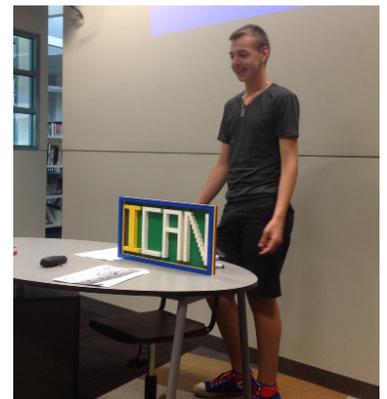
'When Australia signed on to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, it promised to respect the rights of all children in Australia. The I CAN message is about making that promise a reality, so that children with autism are heard and valued'

- Megan Mitchell, National Children's Commissioner

• Students on the spectrum

I CAN mentors (usually 2-4 tertiary students) deliver fortnightly mentoring sessions to audiences of 10-20+ students. Students participate voluntarily and do not need to have a diagnosis of Autism or be aware that they're on the spectrum to participate. The sessions are aimed at building students' confidence, self-awareness and voice. As much as possible, mentors seek to inspire student ownership in the running of the sessions. Each session typically involves games, student-led 'I Can Talks', discussions on individual strengths and student advocacy projects. The 'I Can Talks' gain momentum as students are invited to use their special interest to express themselves in front of their peers. This helps students to realise the skills they already have to work with as they face the challenge of improving other, less developed skills.

The sessions promote a 'culture of mentoring' within the group. We work towards enabling mentoring relationships between mentees and I CAN mentors or teachers. Mentors and students are given time to get to know each other and for mentoring relationships to develop naturally and at the behest of the students. Mentors are equipped with theoretical training before their first session. Following that, much more in-depth, on-the-job practical training is provided between the fortnightly sessions. We have found that, in time, some mentees feel ready to mentor other students.



'In phase two of Marymede's pilot, some of the secondary students will join the tertiary students as trained mentors and take I CAN into Marymede's primary school for the benefit of all primary students'

- Christian Tsoutsouvas, Coordinator, School Networks and 20-year-old on the spectrum

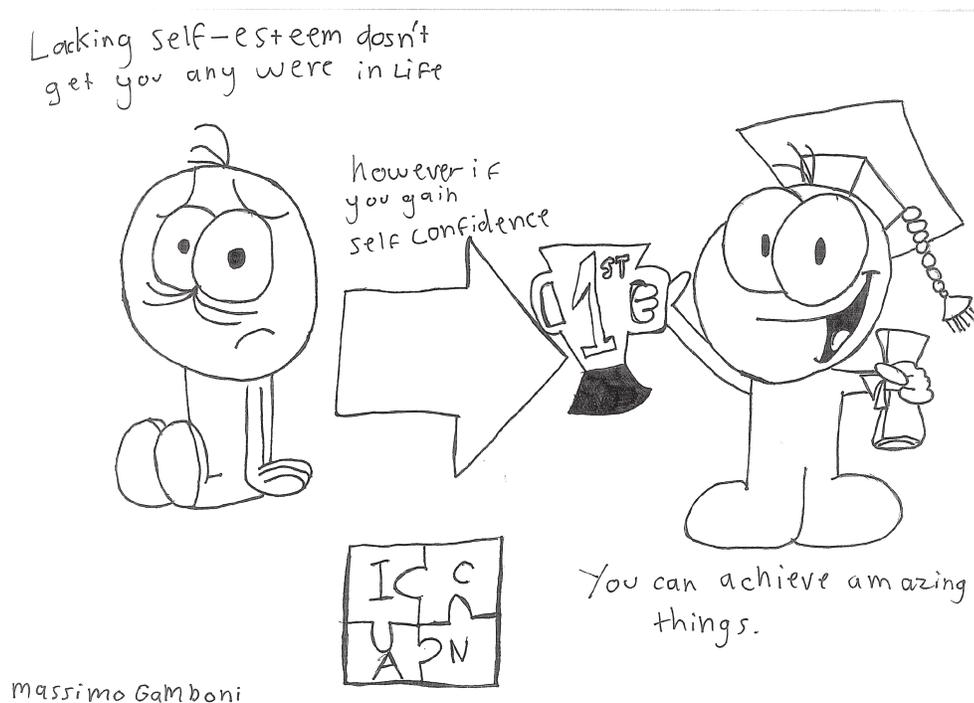
Outside of the full I CAN Schools initiative, we also work with students who feel ready to start their own 'I Can' networks and run their own peer mentoring sessions using I CAN's content.

• Parents

I CAN mentors and school teachers regularly consult parents of students on the spectrum during our mentoring. Parents are brought together for an information night and to give their consent before the mentoring begins. At the end of the year, parents are brought together again to listen to students' refined 'I Can Talks' from the fortnightly mentoring.

Get involved:

- Support I CAN's Mentors through www.chuffed.org/project/ican
- Contact hello@icannetwork.com.au to hear about the 2016 launch of I CAN Schools
- Promote the upcoming Teens Camps (1-3 May 2015; 11-13 September 2015)
- Become an I CAN Mentor through tinyurl.com/ICan-CampMentor-EOI



'I CAN' Create Change

Rethinking Autism: From 'I Can't' to 'I Can' #awetismrethink

Key achievements

- 131,468 views on Youtube: www.youtube.com/TheICANNetwork
- 25 mentions in the media
- Delivered 5 I CAN presentations to government forums
- Active following of around 1,000 people
- Partnership with SYN FM to deliver 'Great Minds Don't Think Alike'
- Winner, 2014 Best Interview on SYN FM
- 25,000 signatures in Isabelle Curtis' World Challenge campaign

We are driving a rethink of Autism from 'I Can't' to 'I CAN'. In practice, this means influencing a paradigm shift in society which starts with the individual. We want to inspire individuals to think 'I can create change' and see Autism through an 'I CAN' approach (strengths-based lens), not an 'I Can't' one (deficit lens). Our greatest tools in facilitating this rethink are advocacy and fundraising.

In our context, advocacy is about empowering everyday people to influence the systems and policies that limit the pathways of young people on the spectrum. Thus the target of our advocacy is not people with Autism, but the people and systems around them. We want these players to experience the 'awe' in AWETism. It's for this reason that we have called our blog Grapevine: fruits of Awetism. Now with 1,000 active followers, Grapevine provides a monthly demonstration of the benefits of rethinking Autism.

'By reframing the autism experience to focus on the unique contributions that young people living with Autism make to our community, I CAN demonstrates the power of believing in each young person's unique strengths and capabilities. I CAN has the potential to change the way that the community views young people living with autism and most importantly how young people see themselves'

- Dr Michelle Blanchard, Head of Projects and Partnerships, Young & Well CRC

Our intent is to set ourselves up as the national platform for the voices of young Australians on the spectrum. I CAN Network is the only youth-focused organisation prioritising advocacy for and with young people on the spectrum. Globally, we are one of very few youth-focused organisations helping to build a movement for 'neurodiversity'.

'Governments should support youth innovations that empower young people on the Autism Spectrum'

- Nicola Shepherd, United Nations Focal Point on Youth

To date, our movement-building has focused on equipping young people on the spectrum with skills in storytelling, community organising, campaigning and fundraising. This approach has ensured we have developed champions for the #awetismrethink. The next stage of this is to develop our national voice in 2016 by capacity building young leaders on the spectrum across states and territories so that we have the foundations for a national youth movement.

Community organising

We have been organising young people on the spectrum into an action-oriented community. We have achieved this not just through mentoring programs and camp experiences, but also through social media. An example of this is a recent Twitter campaign where our campaigners, with the support of Julia Pillai, promoted two hashtags #actuallyautistic and #IAMTheEndUser to disrupt a deficit-based Twitter thread on Autism. The purpose of these hashtags was to draw out people on the spectrum and provide them with a forum to share the positives of being on the spectrum. The Twitter campaign was a resounding success, reaching thousands of people and trending in relation to Autism.

Great Minds Don't Think Alike: See also www.syn.org.au/show/great-minds-dont-think-alike

Great Minds is our digital radio program with SYN (Student Youth Network) FM, generously supported by the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust. The purpose of Great Minds is to provide an open radio platform where people who want to know more about Autism and neurodiversity can listen to radio presenters who are themselves young people on the spectrum or with other neurological differences. This means that Great Minds is produced and presented largely by neurodiverse young people aged 25 and under. Its youngest presenter is a 14-year-old on the spectrum.



Testimony from Great Minds creator, Julia Pillai, journalism student and 19-year-old on the spectrum:

In 2015, Great Minds Don't Think Alike aims to broaden the focus of its content. We're aiming to include a broader range of young people on Autism spectrum, including the perspectives of young people with moderate to severe Autism. We're also going to delve deeper into discussing other neurological conditions, such as ADHD, Synaesthesia, Tourettes and Dyspraxia and other conditions.

Spectroscopic: Stories from the Spectrum www.spectroscopic.com.au

I CAN Networks wants to be an advocacy partner with state-based Autism peaks. In 2015 we have been closely involved with Amaze Victoria's 'Spectroscopic' film which is a compilation of stories of people on the spectrum, some of whom are I CAN mentors and ambassadors. The short film is being released to mark 2015's World Autism Awareness Day.

'I am so inspired by these young people and their quest to push their way into the world and be seen, heard and enjoyed through their unique participation in, and contribution to our society.'

- Fiona Sharkie, CEO Amaze (Autism Victoria)

Create change

- Support I CAN Network via www.chuffed.org/project/ican
- Subscribe to Grapevine: fruits of Awetism by emailing hello@icannetwork.com.au
- Include #awetismrethink in your tweeting

'I CAN' Invest in Talent

Key achievements

- Delivered 9 I CAN presentations to businesses and community organisations
- Partnering with Foundation for Young Australians to deliver Worlds of Work
- Runner-up, 2014 Coles Community Hero
- Appointed 3 ambassadors to create an 'I CAN' Speaker's Bureau

We see Awetism as a spectrum of talents. This was said 'loud and clear' by participants at our first young adults camp in April 2014. Our movement is determined to showcase the talents of our young people, no matter where they are on the spectrum. We're inviting employers to customise job opportunities that match our Autistic talents with their needs. We want to inspire them to think 'I can invest in talent'.

In practice, we have pursued this through creating spaces for young people on the spectrum to develop outstanding communication skills, volunteer, network with professionals and gain exposure to the world of work. Below is a snapshot of what this has looked like during our first year.

Foundation for Young Australians' (FYA's) Worlds of Work

FYA's Worlds of Work offers Year 10 students an immersive experience in a range of workplaces through which students explore the question, 'what does it take to succeed in life and work?' In a first for the program, FYA and I CAN partnered in September and November 2014 to deliver immersive experiences for students at the Northern School for Autism and The Lab (now Digital Enterprise). Among the highlights was student interactions with professionals at workplaces like IBM and Zero. On several occasions professionals remarked at the refreshing authenticity of students on the spectrum.

Coles Community Hero and 'Networker' Web App

'I CAN Network has helped me to realise that those on the spectrum can bring a unique skill to the workplace. They have started a great dialogue which will result in more and more people saying 'I CAN' and gaining high-skilled employment'

- Mark Cripsey, General Manager, Coles Online

Our Senior Developer, Damien Watson, is a Senior Technical Analyst with Coles. Damien came runner-up in Coles' 2014 staff Community Hero program and, for his prize, Coles paid him to work for I CAN Network for a small period. During this time, Damien weaved some magic and developed a web app concept called 'Networker'. Networker will provide an online space for I CAN's mentors and mentees to develop a positive profile of their interests, strengths and skills and match these with volunteering and work opportunities. It will incorporate gamification too!

I CAN Ambassadors

One of the central tenets of our 'culture of mentoring' is to develop a network of ambassadors, including business, community and government leaders, to champion young Australians on the spectrum in the job market. With only 42% of Australians with Awetism employed, this work is critical so that Australia's economy does not miss out on this talent pool. The authors of the quotes you read throughout this report are the ambassadorial relationships we have been developing since our inception.

'It's all too easy, as individuals and as a society, to focus on a deficit model of ability. In so doing, we deny ourselves of all the potential that all of us have. The I CAN Network is all about ensuring that we look at what people CAN do rather than what stops them. The total capacity of our society is enhanced by this approach'

- Professor Ben Canny, President, Academic Board Monash University

Ambassador testimony: Tim Chan, poet

TEDx 'Turning Impediments Into Opportunities': www.youtube.com/watch?v=Woy-XzC-UVs

'Now more than ever we need to embrace the unique skills and attributes of those on the spectrum and the I CAN Network is leading the way'

- Jon Yeo, TEDxMelbourne Organiser

I CAN Network has played a major role in helping me to become more capable of doing many things I have shied away from in the past. Growing up with severe autism, without speech and with enormous anxiety issues, has meant that I suffer from a huge lack of confidence. In the past 15 months, since first meeting Chris in October 2013 I have found great pleasure and satisfaction in being part of a movement to enable young people with Awetism to take initiative to transform their lives. I have given talks, gone for interviews, attended meetings and social events, all extremely difficult in the past because of my propensity to get overloaded easily.

I am also proud to be able to meet and make some friends too. I feel that I CAN Network can provide opportunities to change the negative stereotypes of Awetism in the wider community by focusing on the strengths of people with Awetism, especially those at the severe end of the spectrum. Severe autism does involve many challenges, including sensory sensitivities, processing issues, obsessiveness and difficulty in dealing with changes, but we also have a range of abilities: musical, visual, memory and so on. Looking at strengths and talents yields results that can be put to good use.



Ambassador testimony: Penny Robinson, Assistant Lecturer, Monash University.

See article in The Age: <http://tinyurl.com/Penny-TheAge>

See video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efd5b4NrqeY>

In the last year and a half, I CAN has achieved more than we ever expected. This network means a great deal to me. Asperger's syndrome is part of who I am. I think that the strengths that being on the spectrum gives me (attention to detail, my memory, and being a "walking calendar") far outweigh the difficulties that I've gradually learnt to deal with.

'Penny's attention to detail is an absolute strength in her job as a statistician as she will never rest until the numbers add up. Penny works to her strengths and our research group is the fortunate beneficiary of all these qualities'

- Robin Bell, Deputy Director, Women's Health Research Program, Monash University

Ambassador testimony: Daniel Giles, advocate for Awetism

To me, 'I Can' is about giving life's opportunities a go and taking on new challenges. It's also about focusing not on what a person cannot do, but what they can do.

A brilliant example of taking on a new challenge was volunteering at I CAN Network's Teens Camp last year. I enjoyed having the opportunity to use my life experience to empower other people on the Autism Spectrum to give life their best shot. It was a daunting challenge to lead a group of teenagers on the camp but I truly valued this challenge. What was most rewarding was seeing the teenagers flourish and become empowered to live life to the fullest.

Outro

Blazing a trail

There are many organizations that support people with autism; what makes the I CAN Network different is that we are run by people on the spectrum, for people on the spectrum.

We start with people's strengths. We don't see them as defective or lesser than, we see them as unique individuals with their own specialities and talents, and we make it our priority to help them realize their true potential.

It is our dream and goal that this approach, which we call the "I Can" method, will spread across the globe and help the millions of people on the autism spectrum to seize their own destiny.

To achieve this, we need your help. Please join us in being part of history, and empowering a class of people who are currently disadvantaged, but have so much to offer our society and our species.

Here's to a future where autism is no longer a stigma or a prison, and where "I Can't" has become "I Can."

Max Williams, Editor-in-Chief

