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JESSICA MURRAY: Hi, this is Jessica Murray, Managing Editor

of Stairway to STEM, an online resource that supports autistic students transitioning to college, particularly in the STEM fields. This April, Stairway to STEM decided to kick off The Steps to Autism Acceptance Podcast. We wanted to give our editorial board members a chance to promote concrete activities that people can do to build, not just awareness, but greater acceptance for autistic students and students on the spectrum. What does it mean to really accept someone as they are? Our editors and their guests are going to explore the steps we can take now to create meaningful change. Without further ado I want to introduce editorial board member, John Calodra. Hi John, thanks for leading this episode of The Steps to Autism Acceptance Podcast.

JOHN CALDORA: Hi Jessica, thanks. It's great to be here. My name is John Caldora. My main role is that I'm a case manager at a large public institution in the southeastern United States. Joining me, as my guest in our podcast, will be my wife Allie. Together we're going to discuss some of the difficulties that emerge in interpersonal communication as part friendships and relationships when you're a member of the autism spectrum. And, we're going to discuss some of the

strategies and ways that we've gotten around those difficulties.

JESSICA: Excellent John. This sounds terrific, and we're really excited for the episode. Thanks again.

JOHN: Well, Allie it's great to have you here.

ALLIE: Thanks, it's great to be here.

JOHN: So, why don't you start off by giving us a few facts about yourself.

ALLIE: Alright, fun facts: I'm five three, my favorite color is blue, and I like Harry Potter and Star Wars.

JOHN: Well, sounds like all the wonderful reasons I married you.

ALLIE: I hope so.

JOHN: So, we actually met online.

ALLIE: Yeah, we did.

JOHN: What led you to try online dating?

ALLIE: I was-- I was in seminary at the time, and didn't want to date in the seminary, and I wanted to kind of broaden my circle of acquaintances and people I knew. So, and, about three quarters of my friends were doing the online dating thing, and on the same website, so I felt like it was worth a shot in the dark.

JOHN: Hmm. Yes, I also wanted to broaden my circle of acquaintances and trying to date. Another thing is, I found it more comfortable to be, you know, sending out messages and texts -- well not the actual text, but text-based messages -- to people because that's definitely more comfortable than, you know, being at a party and walking up to someone and saying hi. That does feel a bit intimidating.

ALLIE: Oh yeah. That's terrifying.

JOHN: And research has shown that some autistic individuals prefer text-based communication. That is definitely something to factor into our-- for our listeners, but again your mileage may vary in that. So, we were friends first for a time, even though we met on a dating website.

ALLIE: Yeah, we talked, and had this whole friendship thing going, and it kind of grew from there. I'd say.

JOHN: Yeah, yeah. And we found out about our common interests, and

that we really seemed to connect.

ALLIE: Well, I will say, some of those common interests were kind of a litmus test because I knew that since I like Harry Potter and Star Wars being with someone who did not like those things was not probably going to be a good fit. So that and complete sentences weeded out a substantial amount of people on the website.

JOHN: Yeah. I definitely would agree. I would not want to be with someone who does not like Harry Potter and Star Wars because they

are very much parts of my life. We then dated for a bit in DC, and after that we went long-distance.

ALLIE: Yeah, I don’t recommend that.

JOHN: Yeah, that-- that was not a good…

ALLIE: …not a good choice.

JOHN: Yeah. But some of the lessons that we learned with going long-distance, were, make sure that you make time for one another. Sometimes, if you're not seeing a person on a regular basis, you might want to make sure that you're making time for them because that is important, and it's important to stay connected.

ALLIE: Yeah, there's definitely an element of out-of-sight, out-of-mind with long-distance dating. But one thing that I think helped us was that we both communicate better with text than in person anyway.

JOHN: Hmm.

ALLIE: So that, I think, probably saved us a couple times.

JOHN: Yeah, it's also important to use the communication method that works for you, whether that's limited based on the internet and other connectivity that you have in your area, or whether that's limited based on your personal preferences. And then we eventually got together and got married.

ALLIE: Yeah, next time we get married we're eloping.

JOHN: [Laughter] Yes. Planning the wedding was stressful. I'd say planning the wedding from a distance was even more stressful, and also factoring in what your family wants when you're planning a wedding: that's probably the greatest stress of all three of those.

ALLIE: Yeah. At one point we had the guest list done, and then both our moms got ahold of it. And it doubled pretty much.

JOHN: Yeah. I remember that. That--that was not fun.

ALLIE: Yeah, that was not fun.

JOHN: Yeah, but now that we're married, what are some things that you think we do good with communication, and what are some things you think are challenges for us.

ALLIE: Well, we still have problems telling what each other is being sarcastic.

JOHN: Yeah, That's true. For example, today we were locking up our car, and heading into our apartment, and Allie had turned back to the car. And I was like, do you need to get something out of the car? Because I thought I had gotten everything, and then Allie said…

ALLIE: I-- I told him that, no, I was just walking toward the car for no apparent reason whatsoever, and, in fact, I did not need anything out of the car, but I'm significantly shorter than he is and had forgotten to reset the seat.

JOHH: Oh yeah. Yeah, because like she said, she's five three; I'm six one, but that's a whole other conversation.

ALLIE That’s a whole different podcast.

JOHN: Yes. Even though I knew that she was being sarcastic I still said, oh, okay. And had to think for a second and realize that she was being sarcastic. Another thing is, we're not mind readers, although sometimes we think we are.

ALLIE: Yeah, we think a lot alike, which is both a good and a bad thing. It's-- it's great that we have similar approaches to humor and problem-solving, but we also have different backgrounds. So it's like Inigo Montoya [Reference to the movie “The Princes Bride”] “Yet you keep using that word, but I don't think it means what he thinks it means all the time.”

JOHN: Yeah, that's definitely true. Even though, sometimes it feels like we're having conversations with our eyes, it's important to have those conversations verbally as well because, otherwise, we end up where I'm making a decision that I think Allie wants, but it turns out that I misread the situation entirely.

ALLIE: And that does happen in both ways.

JOHN: Yeah, that does happen both ways. But we we've worked on it, and we've learned that it's important that even if you think you know what your partner's thinking, you still say it out loud.

ALLIE: Yeah, it always helps. Even if you feel like you're stating the obvious, state the obvious anyway.

JOHN: Yeah, for instance, last night Allie asked me to take out the trash. So, since Allie was working in the kitchen at the time, I thought she meant just the kitchen trash, so I took this giant trash bag out. And, as it turns out, I missed this smaller bag of trash next to the giant trash bag. So, stating the obvious, always good. Another thing is, there's been several discussions on the Stairway to STEM website about spoons, and about, you know, making sure that you have enough energy for your interactions with other people. Now, I would say in general Ali and I recharge one another.

ALLIE: Yeah, I actually knew he was someone I could strongly consider being with long-term when I realized I could spend more than a day around him and not be tired at the end of it.

JOHN: Which is a great thing for our relationship, but at the same time, there are some days where we just have really stressful days at work and we just need our space. So it's important to communicate that, whether you need physical space or whether you need just emotional space. For example, we can be sitting in the room, and I can be working on my laptop and Ali can be reading a book, and even though we're sharing the same space, we do give each other some level of emotional space.

ALLIE: But there's also a certain level of self-awareness that goes into that. Because if you don't know what your own needs are, you're not going to be able to communicate them to anybody else.

JOHN: Hmm. Very true. Very true. And also it's important to be open about your feelings. I know that within the autistic population many of us are either very closed off about our feelings, I generally fall into that category, and some of us might be very, very open about our feelings, perhaps too open. But it's important to be just open to the right level about how you feel about the relationship, and how you're feeling at that moment. This helps prevent issues down the road.

ALLIE: And it's important to feel safe enough in the relationship itself that you can communicate it to your partner even when it doesn't make sense to you. Like, even if you don't completely understand what you're feeling, or if you're feeling ten different things and articulating them doesn't make sense, it's important to feel safe enough to be able to-- to try to articulate them anyway. I hope that makes sense. Does that make sense?

JOHN: Yeah, that makes—that makes sense. You want to feel safe in a relationship to be able to process through your emotions with someone.

ALLIE: That's so much more eloquent and what I just said.

JOHN: It got to the same point eventually.

ALLIE: Yeah, I guess so. That's what matters.

JOHN: So it—it, that safety in a relationship is definitely something important to look for in a partner, or even in a friend, because we often process our emotions or our thought processes with friends and colleagues at work or at school, and it's important to find that and or develop that relationship with our friends and colleagues, that they are, you know, willing to listen to us. Any other comments or closing thoughts?

ALLIE: I feel like we dwelt more on the whole being married bit and not the friendship bit, but a lot of it carries over.

JOHN: It does, yes. Because in addition to being married, we are also friends. We share similar interests, we do activities together, and we also support one another. So it's very similar to a friendship, but at the same time there are some differences.

ALLIE: It's like friendship leveled up.

JOHN: That's a good way to put it. See that-- that's more eloquent than what I was going to say.

ALLIE: I wouldn’t say eloquent. I would say concise, but, anyway, go

ahead.

JOHN: Friendship is a little different in that there are some boundaries that you need to set that you might not set in a relationship with an intimate partner. It's important that if you're in a friendship, that you maintain your own sense of self. That's also important in a relationship, but even more so in friendships. It's also important that you make time for yourself, and that you don't get sucked into what is generally called “drama” unless you feel comfortable doing so.

ALLIE: Well, I mean, to an extent you have to maintain your own sense of self in a marriage, but once you’re married, your partner's drama is your drama, whether you like it or not. So.

JOHN: So, that is a major difference between friendships and relationships. Well, it's been great having you here Allie, and it's been great having you, our listeners, here. I certainly hope that you'll check out the other podcasts that we're releasing for Autism Awareness Month here on Stairway to STEM, and if you have any questions please leave them in the comments.

JESSICA: This is Jessica Murray again. Thanks for listening to this episode of the Steps to Autism Acceptance Podcast. For links, bios, and more information on this episode; plus additional resources for autistic students transitioning to college visit Stairway to STEM dot org. Again, thanks for listening, and keep tuning in.

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