

?Aspie Comic? breaks down barriers to succeeding with Autism



By Brock Weir

When life got particularly rough for Michael McCreary and his family, what else could they do but laugh?

Mr. McCreary, 18, has Asperger's Syndrome. Coupled with what he describes as a ?debilitating inability to stop talking?, after being encouraged by his mother he found a perfect outlet for himself ? on stage making people laugh.

?I had all these ideas of writing journals and she wanted to find a way for me to express what I was going through, the anguish, and put a comedic spin on it,? he said, noting his first foray onto the stage in a Stand Up for Mental Health program in Guelph. ?Since then, I have been able to hone my skills, get the special ?education' required, and get out on a circuit and I have just been going strong ever since for four years.?

This circuit is the stand-up comedy circuit. Billing himself as the ?Aspie Comic?, Mr. McCreary is due to finish up a cross country comedy tour this week, on which he has also been filming a documentary about people living on the Autism spectrum.

Joining forces with the Autism Society of Ontario ? York Region Chapter, which provides assistance to individuals and families living on the spectrum throughout the Region and South Simcoe ? he made his York Region stop last week in a fundraising event to help the society raise money for their camp programs.

Following the York Region leg of his tour, Michael was particularly proud to be Toronto-bound, where he appeared at the Geneva Conference at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre as the opening act for a personal hero of his, Temple Grandin, who he describes as ?the Elvis of Autism.?

Mr. McCreary said he first found the ability to make people laugh whenever life threw him and his family a few curveballs with autism.

?We have taken the occasional setbacks in a light-hearted manner,? he explained. ?We have been able to look at things others might deem tragic or just difficult to move beyond or move past, but we just like to make fun of it. I think if we can't fix a problem, if we have to laugh at it first. If we're too busy being maudlin about something then we can't look at how absurd the whole situation is in the first place.?

According to his dad, Doug, one of the purposes of their cross country tour is not necessarily to spread this philosophy, but to truly ?defy the stereotypes? surrounding Asperger's, Autism, and the variety of other challenges on the spectrum, most of which are

negative, he said.

?We're talking to families with positive experiences and positive stories, things they are doing just to live life and do positive things, despite having what many consider to be a negative diagnosis,? said Doug.

As they have gone from comedy club to comedy club, and venue to venue, both McCrearys said they have felt the rewards of talking to such positive people. There has been no scepticism from the audience in what they are trying to do, said Michael, and what has resulted is a particularly valuable dialogue and exchange, fostering the idea that people succeed across the board despite the challenges being on the spectrum might provide.

?I think people want others to succeed,? said Michael. ?Most humans are good natured, whether they want to believe it or not. They don't want to see someone bomb up there on stage. They want someone to prevail and entertain them so they can have a good time. My shows are not just comedy shows, but having an opportunity to form a connection or a relationship with an audience. I love hanging out before or after a show and interact with people I have been able to connect with on stage because I like to tear down those barriers.

?What I like after shows is a lot of kids come to see our performance. The youngest I ended up seeing was about 11-years-old. They were really into it that I was on the spectrum, they identified, and liked being able to see someone else on the spectrum going up and pursuing something. It is being able to have that conversation and knowing someone else is on the spectrum is able to do this ? and there is no reason why we shouldn't.?