

114: Neurodivergence Is a Culture, Too: Shifting Perspectives on Autism

DESHNA NAGAR: Welcome to *12 Degrees*. I'm Deshna Nagar and today we are going to talk about the cultural degree of wellness. A big part of this degree is staying connected to our own identities and staying curious about perspectives different from our own. If I asked you to name an example of cultural identity, what would come to mind? Race? Ethnicity? Religion? What about autism? I'm here with Cailyn Ann Teague. Cailyn is a graduate of Penn State Law and currently serves as a deputy county attorney in Tucson, Arizona. She's also autistic. Cailyn is open about what it's like to be invisible in spaces that haven't always welcomed neurodiversity. She wants to encourage the next generation of autistic students and remind Neurotypicals that autism is a vibrant culture we can all learn from and embrace. Cailyn, thank you so much for being here today.

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: Thank you so much for having me.

DESHNA NAGAR: So, you've always wanted to be a lawyer. You've wanted to be a lawyer since you were nine years old. Who did you look to as a role model?

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: When I was nine years old, it was more like the Supreme Court justices at the time. Like Ruth Bader Ginsburg. But when I got diagnosed formally with autism, I tried to find people who were autistic that were attorneys, but there wasn't any. Like Google came up with zero attorneys that were openly autistic. But later in 2019 that Hailey Moss was one of the first openly autistic people who passed the bar in Florida, and she was youngest at the time. She was 24 years old. And that was one of the people I looked up to, and I wanted to make sure there was more than just like one person that we could have, because at that point in time, she was the only one. And before that, there wasn't openly autistic attorneys. So, for me, that was a big thing.

DESHNA NAGAR: Despite not having many role models, you made your dream of becoming a lawyer happen. And you said part of why you work to spread awareness about autism is to serve as the role model that you didn't have, and to show people that you can do what you can do because of autism, not in spite of it. What parts of your identity as an autistic person do you feel have made you especially well-suited for the work that you do now?

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: My focus helps a lot. So, currently I'm a prosecutor, so I have about caseload of 485 cases plus right now in my work. So being able to focus on my work and just go through my cases and prep it for the next day, the next week, the next month ahead, and be able to do that without getting super distracted helps me be able to manage my time better, especially be able to handle that big of a caseload and not take my laptop home because that my laptop doesn't come home with me. It sets up my work, so my focus really helps me manage my time to be able to handle that big of a caseload and not have it come home with me. And then the other part of that to have some self-awareness of where I am mentally because I know I can get overstimulated and that for me, I need to be able to be like, "Okay, do I need distance? Do I need like time or do I need break?" Or something like that, as well as to be able to have I have a good memory. So for me, having 485 cases and either having the case number memorized or having the name memorized already, and to be able to pull that up and be like, okay, if I have like 60 cases one day on my docket, I can have a judge read a case and be like, okay, what do I need for that specific situation versus a different one and be able to differentiate and remember where I am, and while I have notes and everything, it helps to be able to not have to be solely reliable on notes, especially when like the power goes out or the Wi-Fi goes down. The Wi-Fi goes down a lot. So that helps with being able to do that and not be like solely reliant on my tech and to be able to discuss cases or if we're in the middle of a trial, to be able to have my facts without having like a script right in front of my face.

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DESHNA NAGAR: Yeah, I think that's really amazing that you can retain so much information. I mean, for 485 cases, that's a lot. And then also not bringing your work home. I mean, kudos to you. I wish I could do that. So, it sounds like self-awareness has been a really powerful tool for you. And I'm also hearing a lot of self-acceptance. I believe it's also your choice to be open with other people about your autism. And I'm curious as to how that's affected your relationships with colleagues.

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: So, for me, being openly autistic, that helps me either sort of discussion or have a level of awareness of where I am, because when I was growing up socially and I didn't know I was autistic, it caused some social problems. I didn't click really well with my peers because I either misunderstood something, they're saying that my feelings got hurt, or they misunderstood what I was saying and their feelings got hurt or something else like that. So being openly autistic for me not just helps with work it helps with social dynamics. Because big part of work, is working as a team, working with others. Being openly autistic helps me be able to be like, okay, this is where I'm coming from, and this is how my brain works. And that stuff, and especially with not being able to read social cues very well or people's faces or sarcasm or tone, that can be hard to communicate with other people if they think I'm like being serious when I'm trying to be sarcastic, or if I don't pick up socially on like, hey, if someone needs to go. So, it's just like my main thing of help you with that is not just being like, hey, this is what helps me work differently or how I can work differently, but it's saying, "Hey, I also communicate differently." So that helps a lot with my peers of being like, hey, I mean, when I say may my means if my face looks completely different or my tone sounds completely different from what I'm saying, I mean the actual words, not what my tone," which I honestly sometimes don't know what that is inferring. Or for them being direct with me because I need people to be very direct and clear, not like beat around the bush, which can be uncomfortable for some people if they don't realize, hey, I literally just need to say the truth because a lot of people, how to I put it, they want buffer. They want to like to say, "Hey, I mean, this but, I'm going to say in a different way to hopefully have someone infer f something," but I'm not going to get that inference. At all. The inference is going to go over my head. So, telling people at work, "Hey, I need you to be very, very direct," helps set reasonable expectations and have that click.

DESHNA NAGAR: Have there been any moment where you were open about your needs and it wasn't well received?

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: No. Generally, it's pretty well-received. It's just sometimes there's a miscommunication or like, when I say, "He, I need you to be very direct and clear," some people mistake being directing clear for being harsh or very intense." It's like, "Please be direct and clear, but also maybe be nice."

DESHNA NAGAR: It seems like you've put in a lot of work to navigate different barriers, and you've created a space for yourself where you can thrive. And I'm wondering for other neurodivergent individuals who are considering a career in maybe law or other traditionally structured professions, what advice would you offer?

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: So, if you feel comfortable being openly autistic, that's fantastic. But with that you might...for law school, I was dealing with professors who for first time had someone in their class being autistic I, in addition to my accommodations letter that I sent out, I sent a personal letter with like, "Hey, I'm going to introduce myself. These are why I need my accommodations," but also, I attach links. I'd attach links to what is autism videos on it, like different things to help educate other people. And for me, that was very helpful in navigating school because that's one of the first things in the legal profession you have to do is you have to law school and undergrad. And those institutions can be hard, especially in

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higher ed, where you might not have people that have taught people with autism or that are neurodivergent before. So, for me, that was one thing where I was like, okay, I'm not going to just submit a really scary accommodations letter to a professor who's like, "Ah! I might have like hundred students!" But have a personalized letter and tell them about me and tell them if you have questions by or how this works. There's ways to explain or learn about it. Because I think you want it to be a collaboration. It's not all on the institution. You have to meet in the middle of. How can I best help the institution be prepared for something that they might not previously been prepared for?

DESHNA NAGAR: So, I'm hearing that what you try to help people achieve is not look at autism just as a label, but how it shows up for you in your life.

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: Yeah. I don't want people will just say, "Hey, she's autistic," but say, "Hey, she's autistic." But say, he, she's autistic, this is how autism affects *her*. This is how autism is in her brain. And that's different for everyone." In undergrad, in law school, there's going to be difficulties. Aria was trying to get accommodations and trying to explain that to professors. So, for me, I was like, okay, let's not just explain accommodations, but let's educate for why we need accommodations. And then, for the workforce a lot of people have their resumes, and they ask about the cover letters for why you want this job, But I also included here's why I want this job but also what I have and how that would help me with this job. And here's how my autism can be a strength. So that's letting my employer know, hey, I'm disclosing to you that I'm autistic, but this is why it's an asset for me. Instead of them going into like a place of fear or stereotypes. That helped me be like, okay I can be open about this. Because I think, if people don't know about something, if people are not educated on a topic, they're more likely to be judgmental of, hey, there's a very big scary label there, versus be curious of what that label or what that nerd diversity might mean, what it might mean for each person. Because it's not a one size fits all. It's a spectrum. It's different for everyone. So, from that, I found the personalized letter with law school to be helpful for that, for teaching links and for doing stuff like this, like the podcasts, or for doing the articles with my school and for the New York Law Journal doing the articles. Because for me, being able to spread awareness and help educate is one of my favorite things I get to do. And that is something where I hope that different structures and different people in here, I look at, so want to look at those tools.

DESHNA NAGAR: Are there any questions you wish people would ask you or stop asking you about being autistic?

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: There's no question. I wish people would stop asking me because I want them to ask as make questions as possible. And then for what question I wish people would ask me...I don't know. I just want people ask more questions, honestly. Because autism is a huge spectrum. We're always learning more about it. We're always try to figure out how different people's brains work, how our own brains work. So, I want people asking me questions as humanly possible.

DESHNA NAGAR: That's really interesting, because I've also heard a lot of people say, you know, "The onus of educating you shouldn't be on me."

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: For me, I'm just like, I might as well, I, I live with- I'm autistic, I live with autism. I'd rather have that communication, that dialog. And yeah, if I got like 20 questions a day, it might be a little tiring, but I think I'd rather have people ask the questions than not as the questions. Because, also, some people might not be asking for themselves. Some people might know someone with autism, and they do. Or they might have a kid that may have autism, and they might just want to have or to figure out, hey, how do you handle this so, I can help my own kid or someone else like that.

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DESHNA NAGAR: Well, I guess I have one question for you.

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: Yes.

DESHNA NAGAR: And I know you can only answer this for yourself, not the entire autism community, but there's a push for person first language. So, person with autism or individual with autism versus autistic or an autistic person. What do you prefer?

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: I prefer identity first. So, for me, I'm not a person with autism, I am autistic.

DESHNA NAGAR: Yeah. It's a central part of your identity.

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: Yeah.

DESHNA NAGAR: And how can neurotypical individuals move beyond just awareness of autism to truly embracing and engaging with disability as a culture?

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: So, I love this question. For me, it's interacting with people that are neurodiverse. Because while being aware of autism and doing research is really, really fantastic, doing research could tell you a lot, but it's also being like, hey, maybe we hang out with people with autism. Maybe we ask people with neurodiversity how it works for them because it works differently for everyone. It's having these difficult conversations that might be uncomfortable for you, that might be uncomfortable for someone else. Allowing yourself to be uncomfortable and vulnerable helps everyone grow. I'd rather be vulnerable and uncomfortable and grow and help other people grow and help other people learn than just, like, wall myself off.

DESHNA NAGAR: Well, that's a great note to end on. Cailyn, thank you so much for this conversation.

CAILYN ANN TEAUGE: I love that you guys invited me for this. This was awesome. Thank you so much.

DESHNA NAGAR: That was Cailyn Ann Teague, an autistic attorney and alumna of Penn State Law. That's it for this episode of *12 Degrees*. Be sure to like and follow this podcast so you don't miss upcoming conversations to help you adopt healthy habits. Until next time, we wish you good progress on your wellness journey. *12 Degrees* is produced by WPSU in collaboration with the Penn State Ross and Carol Nese College of Nursing. Learn more at wellness-dot-psu-dot-edu. This podcast is for informational purposes only and not a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health care provider with any questions you may have regarding the Medical or Mental Health. Please consult your provider immediately if you experience suicidal thoughts. If you're in crisis, help is available for free 24/7 in the US by calling or texting the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. Learn more at 988Lifeline-dot-org.

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