



BATTER UP!

By Xenia Kathy Grant

I have noticed in my life that getting the support I need is similar to managing a baseball team. In baseball, there are nine players on the field and every position has a specific job. At the same time, when the team is up at bat, the players have one goal: To hit, get on base, and score. Many autism supports function the same way. Each person or agency has a particular role and the job description can be quite specific. However, when the supports for an individual are up to bat, their goal is to work as a team to help that person score a home run in his or her daily life. In baseball as in life, there are good days and players who do a good job. And there are bad days when players make errors or do a lousy job. There are even unforeseen events like injuries or a rain out.

Five of the best players on my baseball team are my family, friends, professionals, the autism community and spiritual mentors. My playbook illustrates both the good and the bad, but our motto is that it's always a solid team effort.

Playing at First Base

On first base is my family. I come from a big family and that provided several advantages. With seven sisters and brothers, I learned (many times over) that non-autistic people don't always have it easy. As in any family, I am closer to some than to others. I am particularly close to one sister who I consider as one of my best friends. She listens to me and has supported me even when times got rough. Thanks to my family, I've been lucky enough to travel. I've been to Russia, explored Australia, enjoyed England twice, and went to Mexico and Canada. These opportunities taught me about other cultures and has widened my viewpoints about the world and people.

On the other hand, some of my family members have difficulty accepting my differences. Over the years, their efforts improved, but rarely will any of them voluntarily read about autism just to be educated about it, or bring up something about autism in conversation with me. For the most part, they know as much about autism as the general public. And that is not a compliment. Unless I send them an article, or teach them, their knowledge about what I live with 24/7 is sketchy at best. This disinterest in autism has been difficult to accept, since it's such a huge part of who I am. Unlike my friends, they never even recognized when I went through my deepest period of depression. And they didn't expect me to be much of anything, so most of the things I can do now, I learned from other players on the team. Family can help and family can just not care. There's no rule in life

that states family has to be involved and supportive. That's why my *team* is so important to me.

The Shortstops

Throughout my adult life I have had many wonderful friends, some on and others off the autism spectrum. When I was in college, my non-autistic friends were there to support me, care for me. It was they who listened to me when I went through periods of terrible depression. I was surprised to learn they understood my moods simply by looking at me, since some of my family didn't seem able or willing to do so growing up around them. Not only that, these friends showed patience for my differences and accepted me as I was...warts and all.

One professor supported me in ways I can't even number, and was the first adult to truly accept and respect me. He was a professor of political science and we talked about politics (a high interest area for me!) for long periods of time. Who else would take 45 minutes back in 1985 to answer my question, "Is Muammar Qaddafi a nut?" Despite my learning challenges, he believed in my ability to be part of the college's annual U.N. project, where schools gather to re-enact how the U.N. and its committees deal with that year's major world issues. Attending was a huge boost to my self-esteem. No one ever trusted me with responsibility like that. It was like having a guy with a .300 batting average take the time to teach the rookie how to hit a home run. This single professor strongly affected how I perceived my abilities and myself; he taught me to believe in myself and that impression carries through to this day.

Today, all my friends accept my differences. When I have difficulties, they are still there for me. Best of all, they seem to truly enjoy when I am around.

But all relationships have their troubles, too. People on the autism spectrum struggle with social understanding, which can make us more vulnerable to others taking advantage of us. Setting appropriate boundaries has been a difficult concept for me. I've had to learn this the hard way, and in fact, I still struggle with doing this. In baseball, a player knows "three strikes and he's out." The boundaries are clearly defined. In life I don't automatically know this – recognize when I'm being used or manipulated by others to their benefit - and people seem to take advantage, particularly of my time, space, and money. In baseball, the Yankees don't share their locker room with the Mets, but this necessary separation is another lesson I've worked to learn. For years, I allowed friends to stay at my place for weeks at a time. Now I've learned that I can take guests only rarely, and for a limited amount of days.

The Coaches

Professionals in the field of autism are like the batting coach who helps the players develop and maintain their skills. For ten years, my advocate, Sue, has helped me tremendously in areas like employment and social skills. At times she has been a liaison between my family and me. When I changed jobs this year she taught me how to write a

resignation letter and coached me on the proper way to let a boss know I'm starting a new job. Professionals help me process my feelings and provide a solid sounding board to see if I am going in the right direction. I'm like a Japanese baseball player learning how the American style of baseball is played. Professionals have helped me understand and negotiate the "foreign" non-autistic society.

The Outfielders

I am involved with many organizations that allow me to assist others while learning valuable living skills. I belong to an organization called Family & Allies Working Together. We support people with all kinds of disabilities (autism included) to realize their goals and dreams by helping them form personal support networks. Being involved in the Autism Society of Colorado (ASC), Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Support Partnership (GRASP) Denver chapter, the Autism Commission, and F & A Working Together taught me how to set up an agenda for meetings, conduct myself at meetings, talk to legislators about important legislation, and run a meeting. Learning these skills helped in the area of employment and considerably increased my self-esteem. I only wish I could have learned them when I was a teenager or young adult.

The Infielders

I feel fortunate to belong to a church with people there who support me in many different areas. I have read about people on the spectrum who have not had good experiences with religious institutions or who do not follow any spiritual path. Sixteen years ago, I converted to the Eastern Orthodox Church. In Orthodoxy, the Liturgy today is the same format as it was over a thousand years ago. I can read an Orthodox writer from the 1st Century, 4th Century, 15th Century, or even the 21st Century and there is a consistency I don't find elsewhere. I need that continuity because I don't get it from other areas of my life. It brings me comfort and peace. Church members are always available to talk about my spiritual issues. And they understand. I have made a point to get to know the priest at every church I attended, and many have become special people in my life, some even becoming a father figure of sorts. When I was a child, my father was not patient with me and the gentle guidance of a man has been important.

Winning the World Series

I believe I'm well on my way to winning this World Series that is my life. My team has all the players in the right positions, good coaching is there when needed, and Golden Glove skills have developed over the years. Finding the right players to form a strong team of your own is not out of reach. Supports are available and people just might be willing to join your team, if you only ask.

Next batter up!

BIO

Kathy Grant has made Denver, CO her home for the last 12 years. Originally from St. Louis, she remains a fan of the St. Louis Cardinals, as well as the Rockies. Kathy is active in the Denver autism community as a writer, speaker and advocate. She welcomes email at kgrantmeow@gmail.com

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