

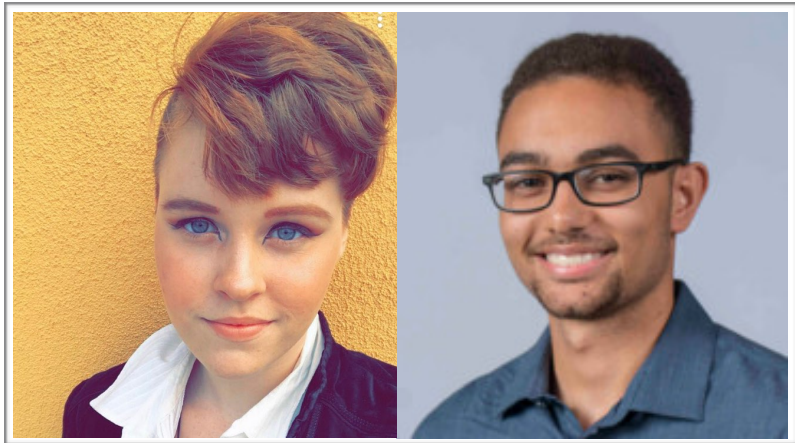
# STANFORD NEURODIVERSITY PROJECT

Current Initiatives | Featured Story | Program News

## Neurodiversity

is a concept that regards individuals with differences in brain function and behavioral traits as part of the normal variation in the human population.

Here at the Stanford Neurodiversity Project, we strive to establish a culture that treasures the strengths of each and every neurodiverse individual. We also work to empower neurodiverse individuals to build their identity and enhance their overall quality of life.



## Featured Story

### Finding Your Voice:

Interviews with Cole Hasserjian  
and Julia Parr

By Helen Zhu

*"If people want to doubt me, my record speaks for itself. [But] students shouldn't have to prove themselves constantly... But if you're on the spectrum, you probably will have to go that extra mile." – Cole Hasserjian*

*"My dyslexia...brought me to art school and pushed me to take that leap. That's the thing I'm good at, that's the thing I love doing, and I want to do that for the rest of my life." – Julia Parr*

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## Current Initiatives

### Neurodiversity at Work

Before the pandemic, it was estimated that about 80% of adults on the spectrum are unemployed or underemployed in the United States. During this pandemic and the accompanying economic downturn, many people are losing their jobs, especially those in small to medium sized businesses. People with disabilities, including autism, are often the first to be let go and the last to be hired. Without performing a study to assess the effects of the pandemic on employment in the neurodiverse community, we cannot tell the magnitude of the impact. However, from a previous study completed by Kaye during the 2008 recession, job losses among workers with disabilities far exceeded those of workers without disabilities. To adapt to the current and future economic climate, our group has implemented various activities to enhance our abilities to identify employment opportunities through novel outreach initiatives.

The Neurodiversity at Work (NaW) program aims to contribute to solving this problem by providing structured, strengths-based support to neurodiverse employees and job seekers, as well as employers who are committed to maintain their workplaces neurodiversity-friendly.

### *Stanford Neurodiversity Project Consortium on Autism Employment During and After the Pandemic (SNP-CAEDAP)*

The SNP-CAEDAP was formed in April this year, weeks after the shelter-in-place order was initiated. The goal of the SNP-CAEDAP is to improve vocational training and employment opportunities for individuals with autism and related conditions while helping California's small to medium-sized businesses to recover during and after the pandemic. Chaired by SNP Director Dr. Lawrence Fung, the consortium is composed of 27 thought leaders in the field of autism employment. Members of this consortium include 3 individuals on the autism spectrum, a former senior policy consultant of the California Senate (Louis Vismara, MD), a former Director of the California Employment Development Department (Mike Bernick, JD), 3 executive directors of Regional Centers, a program manager of a Local Workforce Development Board (LWDB), 5 senior executives of technology companies, 8 senior executives of service agencies, and 5 experts in autism employment from academia, state, or the private sector. The consortium is poised to attract more stakeholders to contribute on finding solutions for the employment crisis faced by adults on the autism spectrum. Currently, the SNP-CAEDAP is working on approaches to assess the effects of the pandemic on employment outcomes faced by individuals in the spectrum.

## *Neurodiversity Design Thinking Workshops*

As part of our engagement effort during the pandemic, the Stanford Neurodiversity Project is holding our first Neurodiversity Design Thinking Workshops, which are modeled from PSYC 223B ("Introduction to Neurodiversity: Design Thinking Approach") at Stanford. This workshop series aims to engage people who are interested in solving problems related to employment issues facing neurodiverse individuals during and after the pandemic. It will be held over six sessions in August and September. Over 90 participants representing multiple stakeholder groups have registered for the workshop series. Results of this event will be reported in the next issue of Neurodiversity Newsletter.

## *Stanford Neurodiverse Candidate Registry*

The candidate registry is open to all job seekers on the autism spectrum. Candidates will be assessed for job readiness. Those who are job-ready will be matched with prospective employers who are committed to maintain neurodiversity-friendly workplaces. Those who are not job-ready will be recommended for other opportunities, such as pre-employment training or internship experience. Candidates who are hired by selected organizations will continue to receive specialized support by the Neurodiversity at Work program. In parallel, the employers of these selected organizations will also receive specialized support by our program.

Inclusion criteria to be registered through the candidate registry include: (i) being aged 18-55 years old; (ii) having a diagnosis of autism; (iii) possessing an IQ greater than 59; and (iv) having the ability to travel to work independently.

If you would like to enter the candidate registry, please visit our website ([med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity/NaW](http://med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity/NaW)) for instructions on how to become a part of this initiative.

## *Stanford Neurodiversity Job Bank*

Individuals on the autism spectrum possess a unique way of thinking, thus potentially boosting innovation. However, their potential remains largely untapped.

The primary objective of the neurodiversity job bank is to connect prospective employers who embrace the strengths-based model of neurodiversity with individuals on the autism spectrum as well as to improve the efficiency of job matching.

If you would like to know more about how you and your organization can be involved in the Neurodiversity at Work program or post your openings in the Stanford Neurodiversity Job Bank, please send an email to [neurodiversityatwork@stanford.edu](mailto:neurodiversityatwork@stanford.edu). You can also learn more about our program by visiting our website ([med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity/NaW](http://med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity/NaW)) for instructions on how to become a part of this initiative.

## Neurodiverse Student Support Program

Launched in Summer 2019, the Neurodiverse Student Support Program (NSSP) has provided comprehensive support to its first year of neurodiverse students at Stanford. During the academic year, five participants of the program received support for transitioning from high school to college. All mentees who completed an end-of-year survey reported high levels of satisfaction with their transition as a student to the college experience at Stanford. As Spring Quarter came to a close, mentors worked with mentees to formulate summer plans, which included internships, community and advocacy work and employment.

### *What's New in 2020-2021?*

#### *Now Accepting New Student Mentees!*

After a successful first year, the program is accepting new student participants for the 2020-2021 academic year. Our second cohort of mentors joined the growing program during Winter Quarter. They completed extensive training to work with neurodiverse students and are paired with current mentees and ready for our new incoming mentees! Structured around connection, learning, psychoeducation, and support, the program continues to focus on building a culture that treasures the strengths of neurodiverse individuals, empowers current students and attracts neurodiverse individuals to study at Stanford.

#### *Support During COVID-19*

During remote learning that is occurring as a result of COVID-19, all mentoring programming, the affinity group, class and clinic appointment swiftly transitioned and have continued as virtual programs. SNP staff, mentors and mentees have adapted to a variety of communication methods and worked together to connect flexibly in a preferred manner.

## *Virtual Neurodiversity Transition Orientation*

The virtual Neurodiversity Transition Orientation, planned to occur prior to the start of Fall quarter for incoming and transfer students, will provide knowledge and information on important topics for getting started at Stanford. The content is specifically designed for the needs of neurodiverse students and includes sessions on campus resources, remote learning, independent living skills, transportation, community resources, social support, and an introduction to neurodiversity.

During the virtual Neurodiversity Transition Orientation, the Stanford Neurodiversity Project staff, peer mentors and mentees from our first year will be on hand to support students and share experiences. Participating students will receive access to video content to introduce neurodiverse students to Stanford and campus life and will participate in virtual discussions and activities to further facilitate a smoother transition into college. Applications are open on our website in early August or through completing our NSSP Interest Form at any time. There is no additional cost to attend.

### *Program Overview*

The Neurodiverse Student Support Program (NSSP) provides academic, social, career preparation, independent living, and mental health support free-of-cost to Stanford students. In NSSP, students utilize their unique talents in socially productive and personally fulfilling pursuits, whether they identify as neurodiverse with no formal diagnosis or have autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or other neurodiverse conditions.

### **Core Components**

**1. Topics in Neurodiversity:** The PSYC 229 series, "Topics in Neurodiversity: Introduction and Advocacy," is a one-unit course open to all Stanford undergraduate and graduate students. Starting the Fall quarter in an asynchronous virtual format, the class has three parts that are offered consecutively in



the fall, winter, and spring quarters. The class is open to all Stanford students. Students in NSSP, as well as peer mentors, are encouraged to take this class.

**2. Peer Mentor Program:** Current and incoming freshmen and sophomores are paired with upperclassmen peer mentors for the duration of the academic year. Students and peer mentors work through a mentoring curriculum, and peer mentors also provide support in a variety of areas as needs arise.

**3. Adult Neurodevelopment Clinic (ANC):** This is a specialty clinic providing evidence-based treatments to neurodiverse adult patients (aged 18 years and above) who are experiencing psychological distress or problems. The clinic focuses on a strengths-based approach to mental health care and is housed within Stanford's Psychosocial Treatment Services Program. Populations served include adults who on the Autism spectrum, or with Asperger's or genetic conditions associated with Autism and/or their family members, and adults with other neurodevelopmental conditions. Problems treated consist of anxiety, high stress, and obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD); relationship problems and interpersonal difficulties; low mood and depression; attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and executive functioning weaknesses. Services provided by the ANC include: (i) initial evaluation and assessment; (ii) evidence-based psychotherapy (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, social-skills training) for individuals, parents, and couples; (iii) medication consultation and medication management; (iv) telehealth video sessions.

For an appointment, please call: 650.498.9111 (intake, option #2).

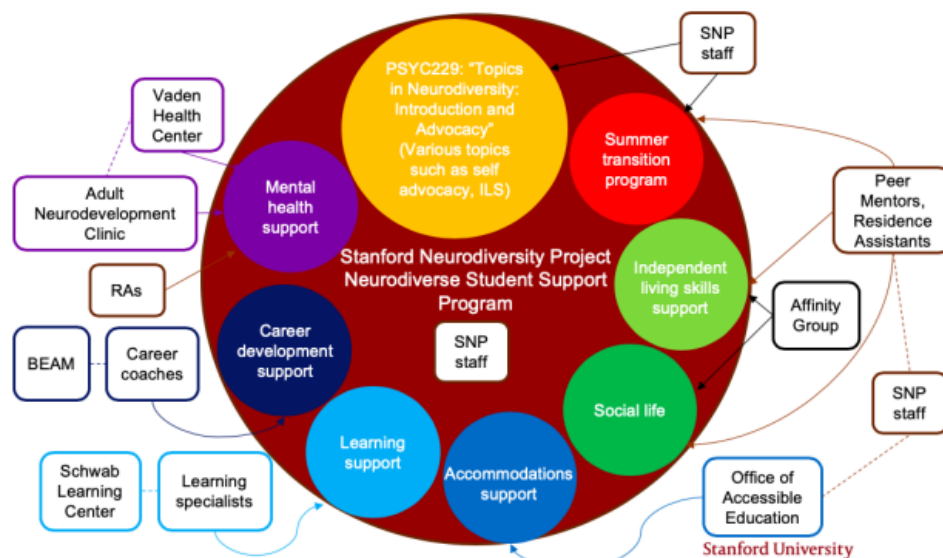
**4. Referrals:** There are many resources on campus that, while not neurodiversity-specific, can nonetheless benefit neurodiverse students. Some of the offices to which we refer students include: the Office of Accessible Education, Schwab Learning Center, and BEAM Career Center. Referrals are provided on an individual basis, and we also assist students in navigating the various offices and procedures.

### Who Can Participate?

Any Stanford undergraduate student who feels they would benefit from extra support and connection with a community of peers can participate in the program. Students can simply go to the Stanford Neurodiversity Project website and fill out the contact form to get started.

### Campus Collaboration

Our support model is one of full inclusion and community integration. While we do have our own "in-house" supports, we continue to build a network of collaboration throughout the university. By working with existing resources on campus, we maximize the support for the students we serve and better prepare organizations to serve neurodiverse students. Over the past year, the Stanford Neurodiversity Project has been collaborating and providing training for all levels of Residential Education and has created toolkits to assist campus resources in connecting with neurodiverse students and creating inclusive environments.



## Stanford Neurodiversity Project: Research, Education, and Advocacy Camp for High School Students (SNP REACH)

This month, 40 students participated in SNP REACH, a free two-week immersive experience. While our current circumstances required the camp to be entirely via Zoom, that allowed us to welcome students from schools across the country who might not have been able to participate otherwise. Students learned about neurodiversity through the lenses of biomedical research, psychology, history, law and policy, and social justice. Our intersectional approach allowed us to welcome amazing speakers and panelists from a wide variety of academic and personal backgrounds. In addition to SNP and Adult Neurodevelopment Clinic staff, speakers included Dr. Rabia Belt (Stanford), Olenka Villarreal (Magical Bridge Playground), Siena Castellon (founder of Neurodiversity Celebration Week), Dr. Lisa Medoff (Stanford), Dr. Vinod Menon (Stanford), Dr. Karen Parker (Stanford), Dr. Vikram Jaswal (University of Virginia), and Dr. Tom Keating (Cognitopia).

Throughout the two weeks, we encouraged students to look at neurodiversity in a new way—through a strengths-based approach—and highlighted the lived experiences of neurodiverse individuals themselves. Our panelists including, a current student and an alum from last year's camp, shared their experiences with a variety of neurodiverse conditions. The two panels were consistently a favorite part of camp. Students also learned about the design-thinking process via hands-on, project-based learning, presenting their project proposals on the final day of camp. In all, students presented 15 different project proposals to carry forward into the coming year.

Last year, we realized our students that were successful in launching their advocacy efforts on campus all had one thing in common: a teacher or administrator who supported and helped champion their efforts. This year, we



added an educator workshop component. Six educators took part in the two-day workshop on the first and last days of camp to learn about how they could better support neurodiverse students and students' advocacy efforts. Dr. Fung led educators through an introduction to neurodiversity and a strengths-based model of working with students, including an introduction to strengths based IEP. Additionally, Dr. Marci Schwartz and Christy Matta talked with educators about their own experiences with neurodiversity, different aspects of the student experience, their role as teachers and allies and formulation of projects that may support neurodiverse students and cultivate a culture of acceptance. On the final day of camp, the educators returned to talk about how they can apply what they learned to their schools and to watch a portion of the student presentations.

# Featured Story

## Finding Your Voice: Interviews with Cole Hasserjian and Julia Parr

By Helen Zhu

*This past month, I had the pleasure and honor of interviewing two neurodiverse individuals, Cole Hasserjian and Julia Parr, each with such an inspirational and eye-opening journey. With distinct experiences, they share their unique stories—from their childhood, education, where they are now, and beyond.*

**Cole Hasserjian** is a Risk Consultant at Ernst & Young (EY), one of the largest professional services networks in the world. He graduated from UC Berkeley with a BS in Business Administration and Management in the Spring of 2020. Cole, who was diagnosed with autism at age three, was the President of Spectrum: Autism at Cal as well as a Senior Advisor for the Haas Undergraduate Black Business Association (HUBBA).

**Julia Parr** is a rising freshman at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, interested in pursuing a career in animation. While she was a senior at Summit Shasta High School in Daly City, she started a neurodiversity club and planned a Neurodiversity Celebration Week as part of an independent study program. Julia was diagnosed with dyslexia in elementary school and is channeling that into her passion for art.

**What is your diagnosis? How old were you when you were diagnosed? Do you remember what it was like? What prompted you to get tested?**

**Cole Hasserjian:** I was diagnosed with autism when I was three years old. At one and a half, I was not able to walk, and I was still crawling. I wasn't talking or formulating any sort of

words. My parents began to compare me to my older sister—she's 15 months older. She started talking and walking when she was one and a half, and she hasn't stopped talking since (I'm joking Lauren). Something was off when I was two and a half and still couldn't do basic functions that a two-and-a-half-year-old should do. That's what prompted them to find testing. From what my parents have told me and the reports I've read, a psychologist said my name a bunch of times, I didn't respond, and I didn't make eye contact. They gave me some Legos or blocks, and I wasn't responsive. It was through a series of testing like that for younger children. The psychologist gave my parents the diagnosis that either I [have intellectual disability] or have autism. More traits align with autism, so they gave me that diagnosis when I was three. This was back in 2001, so I hope testing has developed and improved since then. At that time, there weren't many resources, because 20 years ago, it just wasn't very common to talk about autism in the household or in the workplace. There were only a few smaller organizations and the regional center. My parents had to do a lot of research. I think it's easier now, but it was a challenge just figuring out "What's autism?"

**Julia Parr:** My diagnosis is dyslexia. I was diagnosed in elementary school. I remember the thing that prompted me to get tested was that I was really struggling with math and reading, and I was way behind some of the other kids. Also, I had a lot of anger issues, and they weren't sure why. My inability to read and write, as much as the other kids, was one of the reasons that prompted me to get tested.

**How was your childhood and adolescent experience?**

**CH:** I was lucky in that my family has connections in the medical industry. My grandpa delivered my future therapist, for example. Those weird connections got me access to certain therapists and ABA specialists. I had therapy for around 48 hours a week for five to six years. When I was five, the goal for the day was to learn how to tie my shoes. It seemed easy enough; all my classmates did it. I actually took a full week

because I just couldn't do it, but then I finally got it done at the end of the week. There was a lot of crying and a lot of upset folks that week. It's a very simple task, but it took me forever to learn. It's those sort of things, those certain experiences, that made me the person I am today. It made me more resilient. As a person on a spectrum, we know that we're behind the curve on some things, so we're cognizant that we have to work a little bit harder just to be perceived as "normal" or "functioning." But throughout, I've had a lot of support. The therapy didn't stop just when the therapist left the house; my mom would repeat certain exercises, and we'd do the exercise again and again. It was an ongoing process, and it was a full team effort to make sure that I was able to go to school and learn how to read and do math. Ages three through eight were a grind, but hopefully, there are more advanced methods now, so people don't have to put in that much time in intense therapy; I missed out on a lot of youth sports, youth activities, and summer camps.

**JP:** Before my diagnosis, I was really frustrated and really angry with everything. Almost everything frustrated me, almost everything got me up in arms about something. I was just unhappy all the time because I didn't really understand what was happening, and I didn't understand why I was behind in my academic area of life. After getting diagnosed, I felt a lot better because I was like, "Oh, this is the reason why I'm like this. I'm not crazy." In a school environment when you're that young, it does feel like you're crazy because you're the only one who's experiencing it, and everybody else around you is just moving at a normal pace. Once I was able to get that diagnosis and I was able to tell people "I have [dyslexia,]" I felt like I had a reason to be the way that I was.

**When you tell people—family, friends, teachers, coworkers etc.—about your diagnosis, how have they reacted?**

**CH:** From parent to parent, it's more sympathy, and it has a negative connotation. When people find out now, it's a little different; some people are surprised now and are like "Oh, I had no idea." Back then, the goal of therapies is to get to that point of it not being

noticed: To look, act, be perceived as "normal." Now I see a little change, which is good. I think people should be themselves. We need more neurodiverse folks to be themselves, which I've found the last few years being at college and hanging out with more folks on the spectrum. But that just wasn't a thing when I was younger in my community. There's merit to striving towards independence and keeping expectations high—that's the good aspect of that; but losing some of your quirks and your traits that make you unique is the downfall. Hopefully, there is a happy medium to that, so people don't lose their individuality.

**JP:** My family was pretty supportive. They were there to help me with my homework; my dad would stay up late with me to get stuff done. I had a much different experience with teachers. In first grade, I had a teacher who consistently publicly shamed me in front of my class. She put me and another classmate in "special-needs" desks against a wall opposite to the classroom and said that we were "too hard to deal with." Another experience that I had with one of my friends was we were having some stupid fight about something, and in front of my entire class from across the room, she yelled "Well, at least I can read." Those experiences at a young age showed me what stigma was and what being created differently was like in that environment. It was very difficult to be able to understand that it wasn't my fault and it wasn't something that I could control.

**What were some things that you realized neurotypicals didn't experience but you did?**

**CH:** I think I've always been in a unique camp just based off of my ethnicity alone, my parents, my skin color. Growing up in a mostly white community in the suburbs in a very homogeneous community, my skin color alone was already an identifying factor that I was different. With autism on top of it, it's just a whole other thing. I've noticed that I stress a lot more than my neurotypical peers, and I'm obsessive with fewer things but more depth than most people. Thomas the Train was my obsession for a while, and it was maps for a long time. Cal has been that thing ever since I



was five or six. They were very niche topics, and most people don't have that obsession. Also, sometimes I don't have a filter, which has caused me some trouble in the past. Recently, it's been my own fault, but back then, there was a lot of speaking off the cuff. Sometimes I would offend people and not even know it, and I would give my younger self a break because I was just trying to get through a conversation. I didn't know all the cues—there are some facial expressions and eye contact that I struggle with. But I've never known anything else, so this is normal to me.

**JP:** Something that I have that most neurotypical people haven't experienced was that for the entirety of middle school, I was homeschooled because of how bad it got, not only because of my neurodiversity but because of the bullying that I would experience at school. I would have to go to the “special kids class,” so there was the ridicule and shame about going there. I got pulled out my last year [of elementary school] and finished my entire middle school experience just at home. That gave me the opportunity to catch up and to become more self-directed and become more of an advocate for myself. I have to advocate for myself a lot more than neurotypical students do. That's both a positive and negative. I don't think that I should have to advocate for myself all the time, but it has also given me the knowledge of how to do that. A lot of the time, I'd have to explain to teachers what my diagnosis is and what my accommodations are because of that, and it became a repeated thing that just would happen over and over again.

### **What are some of your strengths?**

**CH:** I've gotten better at using humor over the years; I like to do that just because it makes things more interesting, makes conversations flow, and lowers the tension. I don't like to take things that seriously all the time, but I will if I have to. As President of Spectrum: Autism at Cal in my senior year, I worked with a diverse group of folks—most of them are neurotypical, but we're getting more and more neurodiverse. In a lot of those meetings, I had to relate to my fellow board members from my team. Using humor is a good way to store

information about certain board members, and it makes them feel like you're listening to them. For example, one person really liked lattes from Caffè Strada at Berkeley. Then I would say, “Did you get your fancy latte today?” and that gives the board member the impression that I actually listen to that tiny detail about a random fact that doesn't really mean much in the grand scheme of things, but if I listen to that, I must be listening to all their ideas during meetings. I've developed that skill to build camaraderie during my undergrad. In high school and undergrad, I've been trying to find ways to connect with more people, improve my social skills, be more social, and have more fun. After all, you're only going to be 22 once.

**JP:** I think that art has always been something that I was especially passionate about, not necessarily really good at the beginning, because we all have to start somewhere. I think that was one of the things that I was stronger at than some of my other classmates and something that I've worked at harder than things like homework. With my specific dyslexia, there's an overuse of the right brain, which makes it really hard for me to decode certain words [with specific letter patterns]. That overuse of my right brain goes really well with the artistic side of myself: being able to draw, paint, scrapbook. Anything that has to do with the creative visual arts, I'm really proficient in and I enjoy extremely. Over the summer last year and during the entire school year, I was working on a portfolio for college, and even though it was hard, my dyslexia helped with that because the overuse of my right brain pushed me to make the best it can possibly be. In the end, I got accepted to six out of the seven art schools that I applied to. Also, I often found myself drawing instead of writing stuff down. And I found that to be really comforting: I was the girl who could draw.

### **What are some challenges?**

**CH:** Most of my challenges stemmed from hypersensitivity and dealing with any sort of change. When my mom cut her hair, I freaked out. I once told my therapist I didn't like her hair, so she had to go outside, put it back in a ponytail, because I didn't approve of her new

look. I couldn't function if there was a change, even for the smallest of changes. I was also very hyper-aware of my surroundings; I was always thinking that I was going to be in a burning building, so I always knew where all the exits were and didn't want to go to the movie theater because it's too dark and too vulnerable. Being hyper-aware like that, it's difficult to go to birthday parties and other social events. But my parents kept putting me in those situations. For example, we had access to a movie theater just to practice getting used to going to a movie theater. I wouldn't actually watch the movie, I would just stand inside and be like, "I'm out" after a minute. It took a lot of time and effort, but ultimately, by age 10, things started to become easier when I went to a new situation. It wasn't easy though, and it was definitely a learning curve.

**JP:** One of the things that was a little bit more challenging in school was that I had a really hard time focusing. I had a hard time when other people were talking during class because it would just be too much noise, and I wouldn't be able to focus. On top of that, not being able to read as well as everybody else, I was always behind the class. I would always have to put 110% more effort into what I was doing than almost everybody else in that classroom. I think it was really hard to sit there and watch them goof off and not do work and still get good grades, whereas I couldn't focus in that environment, and I had to push really hard, getting mediocre grades. A lot of teachers did help with that but some of the time, they really didn't get it, and they weren't able to be as commanding in the classroom as I would have liked them to be in order to control the volume. It's unfair for a student who is having trouble focusing in that environment to leave the classroom when they're not causing the problem, which I had to do a lot. I just had to get up and leave and work outside because of how noisy it was when in reality, that shouldn't have even been an option in the first place. A lot of the time, I left the classroom to use speech to text; additionally, if I needed something to be read to me during class, it was really awkward and I felt ashamed and very embarrassed because the teacher would have to crouch down next to me and read quietly while the rest of the

class was silent. I always appreciated their help, and it was a lot better than a robot reading it to me, but I felt very distant from my class and very on the outside.

### **What was your experience like in school (elementary school, middle school, high school, college, etc.)?**

**CH:** Overall, academically, I figured it out over time, and socially, it's still work in progress, but I found some very supportive resources, so I'm very lucky. Once I passed third grade, things started to become more clear, academically and socially. I started getting the routine; I knew how to study and knew how to keep up my coursework. I always did my homework, my prep, studied; I always strived for A's. My parents didn't have explicit expectations for or force me to get good grades, but there wasn't a big hurrah if I got an A. I went to an entrepreneurial charter school from third to seventh grade, which is where I developed my interest in business. In fourth grade, students had our own little businesses, and I had a comic book store, which wasn't very profitable, but it was an experience nonetheless. The big challenge was socially. I've recognized that when I have more better friends, more supportive friends, I tend to perform better because I'm more happy. The difficulties socially were just trying to find a friend group and trying to find folks you can hang out with after school and develop connections with. I didn't find a good friend group until eighth grade, so it took a long time, but I still keep in touch with a lot of those friends that I made then.

**JP:** In high school in particular, they were really good at getting me the accommodations that I needed. If I needed to step out of the classroom, I was able to take that time. They were really good about helping me by giving me extra help, which I think was great. I got a lot of support at [Summit Shasta High School]. Something that I think they can improve on is controlling the classroom because not everybody there can focus. When a student asks multiple times for it to be quieter learning space, there's a problem there that needs to be fixed: Why was it that loud in the first place? Either in history classes or science classes, there can be a lot more talk about a

non-neurotypical brain; there can be talk about famous people through history, who have changed the world, because of their neurodiversity, like Albert Einstein, not only talking about his achievements but talking about how he had to go through adversities to get there. We need to educate students at an early age that neurodiverse individuals aren't dumb; they just think differently. I was called stupid and dumb, and the word "f\*\*\*\*\*" was thrown around, and that is super damaging for someone so young. It was for me, and I thought that I was stupid from a really young age, and I still struggle with that. We need to be teaching at a young age that we're not stupid; we just think differently.

### **How have you embraced your diagnosis? How is it a part of your life now?**

**CH:** In high school, I totally hid it just because that was the culture. My friends would ask because I wore a medical bracelet, so I told them I have autism. That was basically the extent of the conversation. In college, I became more cognizant that my autism actually does affect me. At Berkeley, you're in a class of 500 usually, and it's sink or swim; it's not the high school bubble where more things could be curtailed. Once you get to college, you have to bring your A game, especially at Berkeley; the competition's real. I knew I deserved getting into Berkeley; I had no lack of confidence about that. I basically called it when I was six, so I had that confidence going in. But I became cognizant of how my autism affects me, and then I joined the autism club on campus my freshman year. But what really got me to open my eyes is through being part of the Haas Undergraduate Black Business Association (HUBBA) and how the black community at Cal is an actual community. I had never had that before; there were only about eight other African Americans at my high school. Having the black community at Cal really helped me to find my social bearings and meet some really great people. That got me thinking, "Why is there no strong neurodiverse community, why is there no equivalent?" Most of it is through administrators or social groups they try to form; it's formal, it's not organic, it's not genuine. The black community is led by black students, not administrators or allies. Black

students control their own narrative when it comes to their own events; they have their own space on campus; they have a big say in their own agenda and community. Being a part of HUBBA opened my eyes as an autistic student to the fact that there isn't a similar community for neurodiverse individuals. I suspect that autism clubs on campus are usually based off of a model where neurotypicals run it for neurotypicals to have events for neurotypicals. In my junior year at Cal, that's when things started to change. We needed to diversify our board, we needed to get more neurodiverse folks, and we actually need to build community with folks on the spectrum. I made a group chat for folks on the spectrum at Cal last November, and it's around 20 students right now in the group. We hope to add more people to it, and we increased the neurodiversity on this incoming year's board by over 150%. It's now a really different dynamic than when I joined the club my freshman year. I became much more open about my diagnosis and a lot less shy about it. If people want to doubt me, my record speaks for itself. But students shouldn't have to go through that; students shouldn't have to prove themselves constantly. They shouldn't have to say "look at my record." But if you're on the spectrum, you probably will have to go that extra mile.

**JP:** In my sophomore year of high school, not only because of my difficulties being able to understand my dyslexia but for many other reasons, I went to therapy. Having a therapist and being able to talk it out with a professional who knows the brain and knows what that means is really really helpful. It gave me a lot more confidence in myself to know "Oh, this is just how my brain works," and to know how it works from the inside out really makes it a lot easier to accept it and feel smart. Throwing myself into the things that I was good at made me feel accomplished, made me feel loved, and made me feel smart. I put effort into finding what those were, I tried new experiences, and I put myself in uncomfortable situations in order to figure out what those were. I think my dyslexia is one of the main things that brought me to art school and pushed me to take that leap. That's the thing I'm good at, that's the thing I love doing, and I want to do that for the rest of my life.

## What is your advice for people with autism/dyslexia?

**CH:** Have a long-term view and try to make it easier for the next generation. It doesn't matter if you get a diagnosis when you're 19 or when you're three—there's going to be some short-term losses or embarrassments, and there's going to be times when you want to isolate yourself, but you just have to have a long-term view and do what you have passion for. It's not easy, but try to maintain a long-term view. For older folks on the spectrum, who have “made it,” who are in corporate America, who have higher education, be open to help out younger folks that are transitioning to adulthood. Be a resource; put yourself out there. The structure is not there right now to have neurodiverse voices lead neurodiverse efforts for neurodiverse folks transitioning to adulthood or trying to figure out adulthood. Having that connection between older and younger generations would be beneficial, and that's what I hope to do. That's why I'm involved with the Stanford Neurodiversity Project, that's why I'm involved with other things I'm doing, that's why I took on being a board member for Spectrum: Autism at Cal, just to try to make it easier for the next generation of students on the spectrum. Folks who look like me and think like me should and hopefully will have an easier path than I did.

**JP:** Don't focus on what you can't do, focus on what you can do, and hyper focus on it. A lot of the time, within all neurodiversities, we focus on “I can't do this, I can't read, I can't focus, I can't sit still, I can't do whatever.” On a certain level, you need to know those things in order to advocate for yourself. But you should also focus on what you're good at and what you want to do. With a lot of my school projects, if we have the option to do something artistic, I would put 100% of my effort into making it the best artistic thing ever because I knew that's what I was good at. More often than not, those were the best grades that I got. It wasn't that I wasn't smart, it was that I was extremely talented in this other aspect. Advocate for yourself. At a certain point, you're the only person who's going to be able to speak for yourself. Not only through having dyslexia but going

through a depression and being diagnosed with anxiety disorder, I learned that I needed to push myself to tell people what I needed. I needed to push myself to tell people that I needed speech to text, that I needed to leave the classroom, that I needed space, and that it was okay to ask for that. Asking for something that you need is a skill that a lot of people with dyslexia and any other neurodiversities need to learn.

## What about for parents? Or for friends who want to be supportive?

**CH:** For parents: Keep hope and keep expectations high. Despite the media and others that portray autism as more of a detriment, the experiences that I have on the spectrum have given me many traits that have improved my life. My parents never lowered expectations career-wise and school-wise. My parents have always emphasized to me to never give up and always put your best foot forward no matter what. To the friends of folks on the spectrum, there isn't much to say outside of just be a supportive individual.

**JP:** Educate yourself. That's one of the biggest things that you can do. In society today, we have the biggest platform for self-education. I think sometimes people take that for granted. If you have a friend that you don't understand because they have autism, you don't know how to act around them, and it's awkward, do some research, talk to them, communicate with your friend and see what they need. And then do your own research of what that means. Both parents and friends need to put in a little extra effort to help and understand their child or friend. More often than not, the neurodiverse people have to conform to what society wants them to be. It needs to be the other way around, where society needs to make space for neurodiverse people to be who they are. ■

*Helen Zhu is a student of The Harker School. She is a passionate advocate for neurodiversity and has interests rooted in interdisciplinary research involving neuroscience, music, psychology, and computer science.*



## Program News

### Awareness and Education

Our group has given presentations at conferences and summits around the world, including the United Nations. If you would like to learn more about neurodiversity and are interested in having us speak to your group or organization, please reach out to us via email ([stanfordneurodiversityproject@stanford.edu](mailto:stanfordneurodiversityproject@stanford.edu)).

### *Special Interest Group (SIG) in Neurodiversity*

The Special Interest Group (SIG) in Neurodiversity is a grassroots effort aimed at promoting neurodiversity awareness, acceptance, and education. Monthly SIG meetings feature guest speakers from a variety of personal, educational, and professional backgrounds. Due to COVID-19, our meetings are no longer held in person. Members from around the world are meeting virtually.

#### **Featured Speakers for Upcoming Special Interest Group for Neurodiversity Monthly Meetings:**

**Aug. 17, 2020:** Maisie Soetantyo, M. Ed.

**Sept. 21, 2020:** Lauren Rettagliata and Mark Rettagliata

**Oct. 19, 2020:** Sara Rankin, Ph.D., Imperial College, London, UK

**Nov. 16, 2020:** Emily Rothman, PhD, Boston University; Jamil Karriem, Hiki

**Dec 21 2020:** Jenara Nerenberg, author of *Divergent Mind*

**Jan 25 2021:** Marcelle Ciampi of Ultraneuro and David Hall of NeuroGuides

**February 2021:** Kim Schreiber, Neurodiversity Inc.

**March 2021:** Dana Hooper, Life Services Alternatives, Inc.

If you are interested in joining the SIG, please feel free to send us an email at [stanfordneurodiversityproject@stanford.edu](mailto:stanfordneurodiversityproject@stanford.edu), and we would be more than happy to add you to our mailing list.

### *Course: Topics in Neurodiversity*

The PSYC 229 series, “Topics in Neurodiversity: Introduction and Advocacy,” is a one-unit course open to all Stanford undergraduate and graduate students. The course contains three parts that are offered consecutively in the fall, winter, and spring quarters.

In PYSC 223B, “Topics in Neurodiversity: Design Thinking Approaches,” students explore ways of maximizing inclusivity in areas such as education, employment, and community. Using the design-thinking process and the universal design framework, students design and develop processes, systems, experiences, and/or products to maximize inclusivity and the potential of neurodiverse individuals.

## Stanford Neurodiversity Summit

**October 17-21, 2020**

After having to cancel our summit that was planned for last March, we took some time to regroup and start planning a new—virtual—version scheduled for October. Virtual conferences are not quite the same as in person, but we are excited that we will be able to open the summit to more people. The theme of the Stanford Neurodiversity Summit remains “Scaling Up the Neurodiversity at Work Initiative.” This virtual summit is a unique conference bringing together neurodiverse/neurodivergent individuals, employers, service agencies, educators and students, parents, and professionals from all areas of the field.

Our preliminary schedule features a wide variety of topics, perspectives, and formats. Topics address neurodiversity from K-12

education to employment. We know there's no one type of employment that's right for everyone, so our employment sessions cover a range of possibilities from the Paid Internship Program to large corporations. Perspectives, approaches, and background of speakers are equally varied. Some presenters come from academia, while others are mental health providers. Of course, our summit wouldn't be complete without including the lived-experience perspective of neurodiverse/neurodivergent individuals (some of whom are also academics, practitioners, etc.). Formats differ from session to session; some sessions are traditional lecture-style presentations, while others are more panel-focused. As a virtual conference, the sessions will be recorded so people have the option to either watch live or on their own time.

Registration opens in August. For more information and registration details, visit [med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity/ncw](https://med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity/ncw).



A graphic for the Stanford Neurodiversity Summit. It features a white rectangular box with a thin black border, set against a light green background. At the top of the box is a red banner with the text "SAVE THE DATE" in white. Below the banner, the text "Stanford Neurodiversity Summit" is written in a large, bold, red serif font. Underneath this, in a smaller black font, is the subtitle "Scaling Up the Neurodiversity at Work Initiative". Further down, in a red sans-serif font, are the details: "100% Virtual Conference", "Watch live or recorded sessions", and "Registration opens in August". At the bottom of the box, the dates "Oct. 17-21, 2020" are written in a large, bold, red sans-serif font. Below the box, in a small black font, is the text "Visit [med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity](https://med.stanford.edu/neurodiversity) for more information".

## SNP Staff and Contact Information

*Meet Our New Lab Manager / Clinical Research Coordinator!*



**Ladan Mohamed, BS**

Ladan first became involved in autism research because she has a younger sister with autism. In high school, she worked in labs at the University of Maryland and the Children's National Medical Center, conducting research on children with autism. She graduated from Yale with a Bachelors of Science degree in Cognitive Science, focusing on the intersection between moral reasoning and autism for her thesis. In her junior year at Yale, she worked for a neurotech startup on a project focusing on neurodiversity and employment, sparking her desire to conduct research involving neurodiversity in the workplace in the long term and bringing her to the Fung Lab.

*"I've always been really passionate about neurodiversity. Especially with all the current movements including neurodiversity in the workplace and in the legal system, I love learning and educating others about expanding our understanding of autistic experiences and perspectives. I'm excited to be involved in work that makes the world a more inclusive place for neurodiverse individuals," Ladan said. ■*

## Executive Sponsor

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Chairman, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences; Katharine Dexter McCormick and Stanley McCormick Memorial Professor

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SNP staff pictured left to right:  
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