

Thomas Talks About Coming Out. Twice.

A podcast produced by [Rumble Strip Vermont](#) Hosted by Erica Heilman

This is a transcript of the podcast.

Erica: Welcome to Rumble Strip I'm Erica Heilman

Thomas: So, I went down to a conference in Birmingham, Alabama. And I ended up meeting this man. And I remember that we touched hands by accident.

Erica: Touched hands by accident

Thomas: And then all of a sudden I start blushing crying like oh my god I love this. It was a sign.

Erica: That's Thomas Caswell, he has autism which doesn't tell you very much about him. I mean if you told him your birthday and how old you were he could tell you what day of the week you were born but that also doesn't tell you very much about who he is. Autism doesn't describe a person. If you've met one person with Autism, then you've met one person with autism. But over the last couple of years in his early 20's Thomas has been coming out of the closet in stages. Along with the common difficulties of coming out there are some special difficulties if you a person with a disability. Here's Thomas.

Thomas: Autism is a spectrum, no one on the Autism Spectrum is the same. Some are not able to talk that much, some flaps their hands

physically like this (Thomas simulates rapid hand flapping), some jump up and down, for some anxiety makes them stutter, something that happens to me.

Erica: It's funny because when I first got here you were pulling up on your bike and I was pulling up in my car and you were going to lock your bike up on a tree and I kind of started giving advice, "What about this?" I don't think it's going to be long enough and I thought to myself, he's been biking a long time why am I even having a vote in this? Did you notice that moment?

Thomas: I did, and it feels like you know people with disabilities may have difficulty doing things that people just naturally want to help them. There's a mixed reaction to that. Sometimes I appreciate it, sometimes I don't really need it. I just may need some time to figure it out. Back in the mid 90's, yes I was born in the mid 90's, when Autism was more stigmatized back then even one of my own parents thought your autistic you cannot talk. That's not exactly the case. There are some physical difficulties of people with autism that come with it sometimes. Some people with Autism like I used to have low muscle tone, some have balance issues, so it takes time to overcome those obstacles. Most people know that Autism is a developmental disorder so people like us are more likely to be developmentally delayed in things. So, when it came to have to act like a "normal" person, I mean what's normal? Seriously, what's "normal?" When I was a child I was corrected to have to do so.

Erica: What did they want you to do to be normal?

Thomas: It's just that they taught me I just had to try to blend in.

Erica: Does that also include expressions of joy or something that you want to do or a way that you want to be. Does it feel like your pinned down?

Thomas: Yes, it definitely feels like I'm pinned down. I feel like I get that joy taken out of me because I feel like people expect what they say "normal" if you don't then people will not respect you. It's like how I am supposed to express myself the way I want to when other people are telling me that I need to act a certain way around people.

Erica: In your life, going to the grocery store, in your life going to the public library, in your life going to the hardware store with your mother, whatever. Tell me, what was the experience growing up living with this thing called autism.

Thomas: My parents didn't really take me out that much when I was little because I would get over stimulated and everything so I kind of had to grow upon that. I always liked being out with my Mom much better than with my Dad, no offense to him. I didn't enjoy being out with my dad as much as I did with my Mom. He would try to start arguing with me out in public and I didn't want anyone to hear anything, it was like being humiliated in that way and when he did, so the stress level just went way up and I just want to be like "you need to be quiet, you need to take a breathe." And he did not.

Erica: Would he be arguing about, would he be angry about some behavior of yours?

Thomas: Oh yes, just because maybe I don't see a person that maybe I might run into by accident.

Erica: You might get too close to somebody by accident.

Thomas: Exactly, I may not be aware that their there and my Dad negatively reinforced that and told me (stuttering moment). It's like I'm being punished for something that I cannot control. When somebody yells it's like creating this fight or flight situation especially with Autism you're more like to get into that fight or flight reaction. I wanted to be able to live a teenage life that was full of love, laughter, and everything like that (getting emotional) and that was just really disappointing.

Thomas: As soon as I left, at the end of high school I started to think, wait a minute something's different about me than just the autism. I felt that I was a lot more feminine than a lot of other boys. And I really started paying attention to this. When I give a hug to a woman you know it's nice, but nothing happened really, versus when I hug a guy I have an emotional feeling inside. And I knew that it was time for me to make this big change in my life.

Then it started becoming quick clear that I'm gay!

When it comes to men/women couples, as a lot of people know there is a lot of expectations the man does this, and the woman does that. When you are in a relationship with two people of the same sex there's a lot more

flexibility with what you can do, things you can do together so the heterosexual structure is not there.

When you are in my situation with two feminine men you know you can you can act lady or man as you want. You know there's no compromise.

(high pitch laughing)

A lot of people assume a lot of us on the autism spectrum and people with disabilities are straight. So, when you are a person with a disability that identifies within the LGBTQIA spectrum it can feel like having to come out twice. A lot of people with disabilities they're not their own guardian and they don't have control even later in life.

They might be still living with their parents or feel like that maybe are not in charge of their own bodies.

Erica: So, it's you have sort of an overseer and in some way that keeps you tamped down in terms of really accessing this really important part about who you are.

Thomas: Absolutely! If they are under supervision it feels like they're being watched at all times.

Erica: How does that affect their ability, they're kind of coming to terms with their own sexuality? Does that slow that down? Does it prevent it for some people?

Thomas: I believe it definitely slows down and it could also prevent it because they have to go through a lot of the things. Like some may have to go to therapy or respite any into those things plus if there's a disability makes it so they are not able to you know ever live on their own or be able to do some things on their own, they may have a harder time.

Erica: Why is that why is that harder? For everybody there's a kind of coming to terms with your sexuality at a certain point right everybody goes through that well how is it different for people with disabilities.

Thomas: Because many people with disabilities don't get to make their own choices. They don't! This is what the advocacy movement is all about is Having people with disabilities being able to come out and express themselves of who they are and be able to have a voice. Some people with disabilities feels like they're deprived of that communication. They're constantly being told what to told what to do how to do some things in lives even when they're adults, especially for those people disabilities who are more severe and happened to be taken care of a lot more than others. Some people feel like they can't take anybody out on a date because if that person needs supervision someone needs to be there with them at that table and that can get quite awkward.

Erica: I mean when we talk about sexuality there's that and then there's the bigger point which I guess is love, right? What do you want from another person? What do you imagine for yourself?

Thomas: First go back to the beginning of that point because there's still some people they think that people with autism can't feel love and that's absolutely not true. We can feel love just like anybody else. Some people with disabilities they want to they want to be able to have romantic and sexual relationships, some don't which is perfectly fine. We people with disabilities would love to be able to kiss, love to be able to be able to cuddle up, love to be able to have sex just like anybody else.

Erica: Why do people not understand? Why would people assume otherwise?

Thomas: Because it's like society desexualize people with disabilities. They don't see people with disabilities in this hungry type of drive that everybody else has..

Erica: Why have sexual relationships and what it what comes with that?

Thomas: Love, in my situation which my relationship was kind of a Miracle. When your personal experiences of rough past, like my boyfriend and I did, it's like this miracle that comes into your life and changes for the better you do not expect, it's like a light at the end of the tunnel that just comes out and it's like whoa (high pitch laugh) this is wonderful!

Erica: That was Thomas Caswell. Thomas started a project called I Know Who I am, and I feel welcome. It gives people with disabilities who identify with the LGBTQ population a place to explore their own sexual identities and he's done workshops on the state and the national level

I want to thank Emily Anderson for introducing me to Thomas. Emily is at Champlain Community Services she is a kind of queen of coordinating advocacy groups she's really great there are links to more information about Thomas's work and self-advocacy groups on my website at <https://www.rumblestripvermont.com/>

The music for the show is by Brian Clark and Mike D'Onofrio and there's an arrangement for toy piano and piano by Margaret Lenz Tang.

If you had a minute to write a review for the show on iTunes because that helps new listeners find the show in the great sea that is the world of podcasts.

This is Erica Heilman. I'll be back soon with new shows. Thanks a lot for listening.



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