Hi, everyone. It’s a pleasure to join this autism MOOC. My name's Chris Varney. I'm National Director of an organisation called the I CAN Network, which is a movement of young people on the spectrum, driving a rethink of autism from "I can't" to "I can".

One of the things that I'm really passionate about is developing a strong sense of resilience in young people on the spectrum. I'm 27 years old. I'm someone with Asperger's. And I was raised by a family and a network of family friends who all believed in helping me to have experiences.

They kept me very accountable to the rules that every kid was accountable to, though they did create adjustments that catered to my different needs. And they kind of forced me to get out there and work myself in socially. And whilst at the time I couldn't stand my family and my family friends for that kind of accountability and pressure they put on me, I can turn around now at the age of 27 and feel endlessly grateful for the work they did pushing me into the world because it really did show me that every kid has differences that sometimes really stick out.

I was a kid that, you know, in Year 9 or... Sorry. When I was nine years old in Year 3, when all the other boys were focused on Power Rangers and Goosebumps were the fads at that time, I was focused on European royal families of things and charting it from the 13th to 19th century. How strange, but how incredibly unique for a kid just at the age of nine. And...my mum in particular, my parents and grandparents alongside her, was very determined that I would have experiences just like any other kid because her belief was that if a kid or a young person has experiences, that's what shows them how to be a resilient individual.

And so when I was...kind of 21 and doing work across Australia with young people, I started to meet young people who were on the spectrum like me but that hadn't had the same experiences because their environments had almost disabled them in some measure by wrapping cotton wool around them and believing that those young people couldn't do things.
And so there was this real parity... disparity between the world that I'd been brought up in, which had emphasised "I can" and very much worked me in socially, and the world that I was seeing that other young people had lived in, which had said that they couldn't do things and therefore don't include them.

And so when I kind of saw these different worlds, I thought, 'Well, right, we need to create a movement that very much networks these kids in and creates experiences for them to develop resilience.'

And so that work, for me, began at the end of 2013, where a group of young people, um, some friends of mine came together and decided to run some camps by young people on the spectrum for young people on the spectrum. That would create a situation where these young people were challenging themselves by choice - doing outdoor activities, teambuilding activities, developing mentoring capability and really becoming confident individuals capable of great leadership in the community. And that was an amazing process. I will never forget a weekend in April in 2014 where we ran our first young adults camp that actually had the whole spectrum at it - from what experts would refer to low functioning to high functioning. Really, you know, just the spectrum. And we had the whole spectrum there in its entirety and here was a group of young people, many of whom had been in services their whole lives, had had people that had spoken for them, had been subjects of research without a proper voice, and, you know, had never actually been told that they could be independent, strong, contributing adults in Australia and in this economy.

And it was a really defining moment for me and this youth community to see these young people really start to stand up, because they walked in the door on the Friday night of this camp so hunched over, with their heads lowered and with an overwhelming sense of anxiety, and then to watch them leave on the Sunday with just this posture of standing so tall. It was, you know... Their confidence had really crashed through their fear and it was just such an overwhelming highlight. And for me, that was with 34 young adults, and that showed me that the more you create moments and experiences for young adults that push them, that challenge them, that really kind of work through their negative self talk that might say "I can't" a lot, and the more you in courage them and say, "Actually, but you can. Look at what you did coming here on the weekend. Look at what you did in that outdoor activity. Or "Look at the encouragement you gave in that team building exercise." The more you do that, the more you really see these young adults shine.

We turned around from our young adults camp and ran a teens camp for 15- to 18-year-olds on the spectrum that was led by the leaders we developed at our young adults camp. And that camp similarly was so empowering for those teenagers, who again had been in either mainstream schools or special schools and felt like the system was working against them. And who had never been told that they could... you know, could be individuals capable of great leadership.

And so when we ran our teens camp with a real philosophy of unconditional positive regard for themselves and their strengths, and when they were hearing that from the horse's mouth - that being their young adult mentors who were on the spectrum as well - that was just incredible.

And so that's now led us to a point where those teenagers are now wanting to take that kind of "I can" message and the mentoring skills that they have - and what that looks like is simply being
encouraging individuals - and take that into primary schools where they can start to work with kids who are in the primary system and might be starting to figure out that they’re little bit different and need an encouraging voice that helps them feel OK and safe to be unique, and confident in the different people and wonderful people that they are.

And so I think it’s what... For me, running these camps, which was an extraordinary risk in the beginning - I was working with a team of young people who hadn't necessarily been trained up as, you know, your typical kind of youth work... youth worker facilitators - that, you know, was a risk that paid off. It has shown me that when you bring these young people on the spectrum out and when you give them permission to show courage, to show how resilient they can be, you know, it has this infectious effect on the young people around them when they see someone who faces similar challenges.

And those challenges can vary. It might be, um, a particular obsession that might be crippling for them. Or it might be a... a difficulty to communicate on topics that aren't of, you know, of their special interest. When you bring those challenges together and create a mentoring environment where they can learn and share from other people who have faced similar challenges and similar moments of triumph, that's when you watch a community that is walking together.

And I'm convinced that in my lifetime, we will see this generation of young people on the spectrum really play an incredible role answering the challenges of tomorrow by working on those challenges today. And I think that at the moment, the more we create those experiences, we will turn this cohort of young people that are so hidden and so invisible in our systems at the moment, we will turn them into an incredible asset to our economy in decades to come.