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".

I thought I might share with you how we can link special interests of people on the spectrum with the wider mythbusting we need to do of autism and kind of educate communities on what autism actually is so that we can kind of break down the stigma that still exists towards autism.

And I thought I might share with you an anecdote from a school that I work in. And in this school, I work with approximately 20 students on the spectrum. Most of them are high-functioning or have Asperger's. And they're from a range of year levels. In the Australian system, they're from Year 7 to 12, so that's ages 12 to 18, depending on what country you're from. And this group of young people I've worked intensively with on a fortnightly basis for one whole year. We've been delivering group mentoring, strengths-based skills, helping them develop communication skills, public speaking ability, and helping them really develop some general leadership qualities that can help them in their schools, in their communities, and in their future workplaces.

And the other day, we were thinking about how they would take this I CAN Network that they have developed, how they would take that into the wider school. And several of them expressed concern about disclosing to the rest of the student body that they were on the spectrum, and I can appreciate how challenging that is. I disclosed that I was on the spectrum when I was 18 years of age, though I found out at 14. Diagnosed at five. It took me four years to really have the courage to speak about what I knew autism to be and what my autism was. And so I could appreciate that at 16 and 17, when you're just trying to fit in, you're not wanting to talk about a label that isn't well understood.

And currently, in a blanket way, schools aren't necessarily safe places to disclose. For some kids, they will, and for others, you know, they don't feel safe. And that's an incredibly personal thing. But one
tactic is linking special interests of people on the spectrum with mythbusting and community awareness.

And so in this group I was working with, when they said "Oh, look, I don't want to associate myself with autism "outside of the privacy of this group, in the wider student body." And so we kind of had a think about well, we do want to educate the rest of the school. We do want to make it safe for any student at this school, whether here or now or in the future, to disclose that they're on the spectrum. How do we do that? And we came up with this idea of actually running a bit of a talent quest, creativity competition called Project Dreamcatcher, where kids would get up in the school, whether at their year level assemblies or in their classrooms or in their whole school assemblies, and share what their dreams are or their talents are, and what they hope...what their aspirations are for their future. And the whole idea of this was that kids could participate and the participation was not based on a leadership badge on their jumper, a sporting competition that they might have won or their popularity. Any kid could take part.

And the idea was really to allow people on the spectrum or with any other differences, whether that might be ADHD or dyslexia or any number of different neuron differences, to get up there in front of their classes or school and share what their creative talents are and express that with confidence to the wider group. And some of them felt more comfortable about the idea of disclosing their Asperger's or their autism with their community after they shared what their special interest was and what their talent was. And you can completely see how that makes total sense.

We all want to have things about us that are celebrated. We all have things that we are good at in our unique ways and when that is profiled in a positive way, I think that helps the wider community say, "Hey, everyone in some measure is on this spectrum." All of us are on different types of spectrums. It's not about, you know, us and them. It's about, you know, a global 'we' and how all of us are good at our own individual things and that this spectrum, you know, can fade into the background and it's actually about those people who have those individual talents and leveraging their creativity and celebrating that.

And so the tactic out there, if you're thinking about that challenge of how to disclose, how to make things safe for kids, is to look at the special interests first and then think about disclosure or community awareness after that so that these kids are already understood as strong, capable individuals to begin with.