

MET HC 761 Online Feature Assignment 3A: Rachel Logan

Autism and Motherhood

One Woman's Journey to Raising a Daughter with Autism

The conversation is interrupted almost immediately. Kristy Seltzer doesn't hesitate as she shifts from one to another.

"Lizzie, just pick whatever color you like."

There is a muffled question, then Kristy answers her daughter.

"Sure, that color is nice. Go take it over there. Yes, Lizzie, over there. So that's when Jon and I started comparing what we read to how Lizzie behaved."

She's smoothly transitions back to the first conversation, the effortless pivot of a woman who is constantly multitasking.

The Diagnosis

Kristy Seltzer is a 43-year-old woman who lives in a two bedroom Sacramento bungalow with her husband Jon and two daughters, Emily, 13, and Elizabeth, 11. The space is small, but organized. There's one bathroom they share. The house was a starter home Kristy bought with her husband before the girls were born; now it's just home.

Plans changed when Elizabeth, affectionately Lizzie, was diagnosed with autism when she two.

Jon had taken his daughter in for her developmental checkup and came home from the doctor's office with a five-page questionnaire.

Kristy was upset. "What did you do wrong? How can you mess up a questionnaire?"

The questionnaire asked: *Is your child pointing? Does your child bring you toys? Is your child engaged with you?*

The answers had been no.

Kristy and Jon hadn't worried when Lizzie was slow to start talking. Their eldest daughter Emily spoke early, but was a late walker. Lizzie, on the other hand, had started walking at an early age. Kristy and Jon thought that the girls were just switched developmentally. Now they were worried.

The questionnaire led Kristy and Jon back to the doctor, where they began a series of tests to rule out possible medical problems. Lizzie passed each test. When Lizzie was 18 months old, a developmental pediatrician suggested Lizzie might have autism.

That night Kristy went home and bought every book she could find on Amazon about autism. She didn't know anything about it. When the books arrived, she lay awake at night reading obsessively on the subject.

"Jon, listen to this," Kristy said, reading him a passage about autism.

"Oh," he responded, when she finished.

It was as if the author had written about Lizzie.

Lizzie was officially diagnosed with autism when she was two.

Kristy immediately enrolled Lizzie in Speech and Occupational Therapy. Lizzie was still non-verbal.

The New Normal

Kristy sat beside her daughter as therapists trekked in and out of the small family home. Lizzie worked with up to 5 different therapists 37 hours each week.

Kristy was able to stay with Lizzie while Jon supported the family financially.

“Yay,” Kristy cheered, as Lizzie worked hour after hour. “Good job!”

The therapists worked with Lizzie to accomplish goals.

“With each child, I come with a specific plan for them with goals in mind,” said Occupational Therapist Katie Lane. “The goals can be ‘Today Harry will draw a horizontal line on a piece of paper.’ Or, ‘Sarah is going to push this chair across the floor.’ These tasks help engage the child’s sensory development and growth.”

Kristy learned as much as she could about autism and therapy, never missing an appointment with her daughter. She learned to navigate government red tape so she could get the best services for Lizzie. It wasn’t long before the therapy service Lizzie used began referring other mothers of children with autism to Kristy for advice.

Kristy enrolled Lizzie in the public school system. Every day Lizzie got up and got ready for school, and Kristy went with her. She sat by her daughter’s desk to keep her on task.

“It’s okay, Honey,” Kristy would say, soothing Lizzie when the classroom caused sensory overload.

Many parents with autistic children wish to see their child in the public school system, according to Lane.

“Most of our time in therapy is working toward that goal,” she said.

Lizzie attended public school through third grade, then Kristy and Jon pulled her out. Public school had turned into Lizzie sitting in a crowded classroom with Kristy acting as a one-on-one teacher. This left Lizzie over-stimulated and exhausted each day.

Kristy turned to homeschooling.

The Present

Every Monday, Kristy wakes up at 4:20 in the morning and drives to West Sacramento to train with her rowing team. As the sun rises over the city, she strains to propel the boat over the cool water. The only thing that matters is the ebb and flow of her movements. Her mind clears.

While she is gone, Emily and Lizzie wake up and Emily makes her and her little sister breakfast. Today, Emily makes her pancake special.

By the time Kristy is home at seven, Jon is out the door to work. Emily is on the bus to school by eight and Kristy begins school with Lizzie.

Lizzie has piano lessons and speech therapy classes. Kristy shepherds Lizzie to her appointments and stops along the way to pick up groceries.

Lizzie grabs her favorite veggies from the shelf. They only eat organic. Pesticides in foods do not cause autism, but research has suggested eating organically might help prevent further developmental delay. Kristy buys organic food because anything she can do that might help her daughter, she'll do.

Lizzie is 11 now and as busy as ever. She's just finished the fifth grade, but therapy doesn't take a summer break and neither do moms. Kristy is already planning for next school

year and looking further out to enroll Lizzie in a charter school for seventh grade. Kristy has her eye on a school that averages eight students per grade. A campus tour is in the works.

Next year, Kristy will work with Lizzie to prepare her for regular school life.

“I have to stay on top of her to so she remembers it’s time to get ready in the mornings. She’ll get it,” Kristy says.

A moment later, a muffled voice interrupts.

“Yes that’s very pretty, Lizzie,” Kristy says, looking at a drawing her daughter has presented. “Very nice.”

###

Addendum: Audience and Purpose

The target audience for this online feature is parents of “normative” and autistic children. For parents with children on the autistic spectrum, this piece is relatable. For parents of normative children, this article is an interesting peek into the life of a mother of an autistic child.

Facebook Post

Kristy’s life changed when her two-year old daughter was diagnosed with Autism. She didn’t know anything about Autism or what it would mean for her family. Follow Kristy’s ten-year journey of Autism and motherhood.

