

Q. and A. with author R.V. Kuser

A smart-looking couple stands at the coffee shop counter ordering drinks to warm them up on a cold afternoon before choosing a table. Sitting in the middle of a hum of activity — sights, smells and sounds bouncing around the room — this remarkable man cuts through all of this and his own inner symphony of sensory impulses to chat about his life, his work and his journey as an autistic person in a world that doesn't always “get” him.



R.V. Kuser, a profoundly autistic man who was told as a young man growing up in the Trenton, N.J., area that he didn't have the mental capacity to move beyond a job as a laborer, has spent a lifetime trumping the expectations of others — both for himself and for the legions of students he's taught over 25 years. “When I got involved in volunteering, I figured this is just going to be a lark,” he recalls. “But there was one man I worked with in particular.” Frank, a man with a mental age of about 6 or 7 years old, was frustrated by school and shut down emotionally.

Kuser recognized his own frustrations in this man's struggles. “I realized what was going on. The problem wasn't the work; it was the fact that no one was creating dialogue with him. We started talking, and after a while he became my teacher. I asked him questions and he asked me questions, and it was just great. And I realized, that was my aha moment, that I wanted to be an educator.”

And an educator he is, specializing in autism first in New Jersey and now as a consultant at Winston-Salem's Special Children's School. Working with students from preschool to adults, Kuser has brought his intuitive gifts to bear to help his scholars break through their own insecurities to tap into their true gifts. “I knew how to get past that psychological dynamic of what was holding a person back,” he says. “It wasn't the academics as much as how they felt about themselves.”

It is this desire to free people from their fears and misperceptions that led

him to write his first book, “Challenged, but Not Defeated,” which he and his wife, Marlene, produced with the help of a Duke Energy Regional Artist Project Grant from the Arts Council and an additional grant from Triad First in Families. “Marlene said you've got a great story. You've got to tell the world,” he remembers. “So I began writing this story down. But the hardest part of writing the story is that there was a lot of baggage. So I would write a little bit, take some time. And I wrote the raw part of the book within two years.”

With the basic backbone of the story ready, he worked with Chris Moret, a friend who had been an editor at a publishing house, to refine his story into distinct chapters Another friend, web-site designer Jess Zimmerman, did the layout and cover design.

Kuser also points out the incredible contributions of his wife, who serves as his secretary and cheerleader in addition to her day job at Enrichment Center of Winston-Salem. “The book is actually a celebration of our relationship together,” he says. “It talks about me, but it also highlights the fact that Marlene is my partner, and she accepts me for who I am. It's what propels the book to be told, because you need a support system. You have to accept yourself, but you also need someone close by who loves you unconditionally.”

This love and support helped Kuser write his first book, which he hopes will help break down barriers among students outside his classroom. “People have very defined expectations and

parameters about what autism is, or what mental illness is,” he says. “And I think that's the limitation that a lot of autistic people are dealing with. The fact is that people, whether they're autistic or not, all have limitations. We all have challenges. But the idea is to think outside the box, outside the parameters. We don't have to fit in the parameters that others set for us.”

What is the best thing you've seen recently?

The best thing I have seen recently involves my synesthesia. Synesthesia is a neuropsychological trait in which the stimulation of one sense causes the automatic experience of another sense. I went to the symphony and, as usual for me, I saw many “tendrils” of colors much like the Disney movie “Fantasia.” My synesthesia allows me to appreciate the beauty of music at another level.

What's your dream project?

My dream project is to create a theater group for people who have any kind of mental challenges. The group would take the performance from creation to production.

What would you be doing if you weren't involved in writing?

There is no other option for me; my passion is expressing ideas to help “neurotypical” individuals (people not on the spectrum) understand autism and to find things they can relate to from “my world.”

What's the best thing about your job as a writer?

The best part of being a writer is it allows me to convey to my audience that individuals who may have some form of physical or mental challenge are not defined by their limitations but by their strengths.

If you could change one thing about the arts in Winston-Salem, what would it be?

I am very proud to be part of a town that has such a rich assortment of arts. My wish is to see more of a collaboration of talent from all local artists. An individual might have some form of special needs and would be able to furnish another artist with a new dimension to consider when creating their new artwork.

What are you most proud of?

I am most proud of being able to create a book. I didn't have much experience in writing a book plus I am very conscious of the difficulties I have. I was very pleased with my ability to complete the book. Along with that, I felt the message of the book was clear and concise with the situations and experiences I have encountered in my life. I wanted to give my perspective and knowledge to help people go beyond autism, schizophrenia and abuse.

If you'd like to read Kuser's book, you can order a copy at his website, kuser-talk.com.

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