

Autism and the Sunflower with William Vanderpuye

Speaker Key:

CB Chantal Boyle

WV William Vanderpuye

VO Voice Over

VO

Welcome to The Sunflower Conversations, where we explore the Hidden Disability Sunflower and its role in supporting people with hidden disabilities.

00:00:18

CB

Welcome to the Sunflower Conversations. I'm your host, Chantal, and I am joined today by William Vanderpuye. William works at Sutton Council, and I had the pleasure of being in his presence earlier this week because Sutton Council have joined the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Network, which is amazing. So they're going to be looking after their staff and using it to support the disability inclusion initiatives that they've already started, which is great, but they recognise that they're on a journey, so there's more to do.

But they're also going to make sure that this is available for the community of Sutton and to be able to support the residents. So, I was invited along to be part of their launch, which was great, and got to meet some lovely people. There was the Sutton Parents Forum, who are wonderful advocates of the Sunflower, and they've made a wonderful film to advocate for why it is important for people to recognise the Sunflower in community.

What struck me was William spoke about himself and his journey, and I invited him to share that with you because I think it's really significant and it really gave me pause for thought, and I just thought it was brilliant. And I'm going to say no more. I'm going to say, William, over to you.

00:01:49

WV

Thank you, Chantal. I have a hidden disability, and it's not immediately apparent to others. With my hidden disability, I've encountered scepticism and a lack of understanding from others who may not recognise the extent of my challenges. I have faced dilemmas about whether or when to disclose my condition.

The fear of judgement or disbelief has often led to a reluctance to share my challenges. My internal struggles may go unnoticed, making it challenging for others to grasp the full extent of my difficulties.

Having this condition is not all doom and gloom. I might struggle to engage in small talk and find it difficult to form friendships, but it makes me to be musical and to appreciate art and nature, to hyperfocus on the subjects that interest me, and to think outside the box and to have a wicked sense of humour.

Since I came to Sutton, I've been amazed at the tremendous amount of love and kindness, support and understanding I have received from staff at this organisation. And I am fortunate to have the most amazing manager and supervisor who time and again has continued to believe in me, in spite of my shortcomings and my disability.

00:03:20

Following my diagnosis, I've received a tremendous amount of support and accommodations to help me succeed in education and employment. I have successfully navigated education and employment wearing the Sunflower lanyard around my neck.

I sit before you today to share the profound significance the Sunflower lanyard holds in my life. This seemingly simple accessory has become a symbol of inclusivity, understanding and compassion. When I first encountered the Sunflower lanyard during the pandemic, it was more than just a vibrant emblem around someone's neck. It represented a silent connection with hidden challenges.

The Sunflower lanyard is not merely a fashion statement. It is a beacon that signals a need for patience and empathy. In a world where differences can sometimes create barriers, the Sunflower lanyard serves as a reminder that we should approach one another with kindness and understanding. It speaks to diversity of experiences and challenges that individuals may often face, often unseen by the naked eye.

For those with hidden disabilities or conditions, wearing the Sunflower lanyard becomes a choice, a choice to disclose, not for sympathy but for understanding. It is an invitation for those around to recognise that disabilities come in various forms, not always visible, but equally impactful.

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Personally, this symbol resonates with me on a deep level. It has taught me the importance of not making assumptions about others, of being patient when someone may need a little extra time or assistance. The Sunflower lanyard has become a catalyst for fostering a more compassionate and inclusive mindset within myself.

It challenges us to move beyond surface judgements and stereotypes, urging us to see people for who they are beyond what meets the eye. It's a call to action, asking us to create an environment where everyone, regardless of their challenges, feels accepted and valued.

In a world that often seems divided, the Sunflower lanyard unites us in a shared understanding that each person's journey is unique and we should approach one

another with empathy. It reminds us that, just like the sunflower turns towards the sun for nourishment, we too can turn towards each other to cultivate a more compassionate society.

So let us carry the spirit of the Sunflower lanyard in our hearts, a symbol of unity, empathy and the power we each hold to make a positive difference in the lives of those around us. My name is William Vanderpuye. I'm a newly qualified social worker in the learning disabilities 18 to 25 team, and I am autistic. Thank you.

CB

That is just... Yes, it's made me feel exactly the same way as it did when I heard you speak earlier this week.

00:06:55

WV

Thank you.

CB

You've got such a way with words, like how you articulated what it represents, what it means to you and what it can mean to society, and everybody within that is just... Honestly, it's made the hairs and everything go all tingly.

WV

Thank you.

CB

Yes. You used the word beacon, which is superb. You've spoken about so much in there. When you're wearing it, how do you feel?

WV

When I'm wearing it, I feel that I am making a statement, that I'm being bold, that I'm sharing part of my identity that many people might not immediately see to the world. I feel protected and I feel supported. I feel that I do not need to explain myself and I feel that I'm appealing to people's empathy.

CB

You are listening to the Sunflower Conversations with Chantal. To learn more about the Sunflower, visit our website. Details are in the show notes. When did you discover it? How did you first come across it?

WV

I first came across the lanyard during the pandemic because during the first lockdown we were only allowed to go to the shops, and once I got to the shop and I

saw that some people had this lanyard around their necks, I didn't really understand what it was all about.

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And I believe I saw that one of the lanyards had this square around it and I could read that it said the person is exempt from wearing a mask, but it goes far beyond that. It shows that you have a hidden condition, a hidden disability, and that you're making a statement.

CB

Exactly. Exactly that. In the pandemic, people did wear them because their health conditions prevented them from wearing a face mask, whether that was through anxiety or breathing issues or PTSD or many, many issues, however, that they are all hidden conditions, aren't they? So that's why it really became I guess a lot more noticeable during that period.

Wearing face masks thankfully is not a requirement anymore, so we're able to move on from that conversation and actually get to the heart of what the Sunflower is here to do. So, congratulations with becoming a qualified social worker.

WV

Thank you very much.

CB

That must feel like such an achievement. How much training do you have to do to become a social worker?

WV

I trained for two years. I did a Master's in social work at Goldsmith University, and I had to do two placements. I did one with Greenwich Mencap and the other one in Lewisham Council, SLAM NHS. So, it was quite intense. I had a dissertation to do, lots of shadowing, lots of practical and theory. But through all my university work I kept my lanyard on and it made me feel validated because people recognised that I had a condition, I had a disability. And they were really patient with me. I got extra supports.

00:10:54

CB

That's brilliant.

WV

That's what has helped me to get to where I am today.

CB

That's really fantastic. We've had a lot of universities become members in the same way that Sutton Council have become members, and if you think, people in education are going to be people who are going to really have valid and valuable input to society, culture as we move forward, regardless of what sector or industry you go into. So, it being recognised in schools and being recognised in universities is super crucial, I believe.

WV

Absolutely.

CB

So that you can bring your whole self and your best self to really absorb everything that you need to learn. I didn't go to university, so I'm always incredibly impressed when people are able to learn in that way. I'm a much more practical learner. So, I'm always really impressed. But people meet challenges, and if the Sunflower enables you to overcome those challenges and bring down the barriers, then it can only be positive.

You're a social worker for Sutton Council, and your area of specialism is families with learning difficulties?

00:12:15

WV

Yes, learning disabilities. I work with the transition team, that's 18 to 25, those moving from children's services to adult services. They pass by my team first, which is the transition team, right in the middle. We try to make the transition as smooth as possible.

CB

Yes, because that's one of the things, when I've spoken to parents, is that my child has a disability now, if it's a learning disability, has that now, but it isn't going to stop when they reach 18. We still need continued help actually post-16. So, that's the gap that you're bridging with the service that you provide.

WV

Exactly. That's the gap that we bridge. The condition of the child might not change, but children's services and adult services are completely different. You've got different policies, different ways of operating and everything. So, with my team, we try to meet them in the middle and try to incorporate aspects of children's care with adults' care, fusing them together to make the transition as smooth as possible. So, that's what we do.

CB

A really valuable service. Really valuable, especially at a time when those families will be feeling isolated, scared, worried about what the future might hold. So,

congratulations on becoming qualified.

WV

Thank you. Thank you very much.

CB

Have you got a couple of quick tips on the things that a company could do to support somebody in a similar position to you, a Sunflower wearer, who wants to succeed at work but is maybe facing a couple of challenges?

00:14:08

WV

Yes. All I would like to say is that we need to be able to listen to the employee, the Sunflower wearer, because they are experts on their own lives. They've known how they've been ever since childhood up till now, so they know the kind of support they might need. And listening to them might give us a clue as to how best we can support them because I believe that a company would want to get the best of their employees.

CB

That's superb advice. I think that we can all take a leaf out of the book in everything that we do within our lives because there's a lot of noise, and I don't know sometimes how much active listening is taking place. Is there anything else? Active listening is superb advice. Anything else that you wanted to share?

WV

Yes. It would be also beneficial for employers to look into assistive technology. There's a lot of assistive technology out there that could help people with hidden disabilities. It could be software, it could be things for recording, it could be readers, things to help them to read.

And we could also look at the environment because the environment plays a very important part in productivity at work. Look at lighting, look at the noise. Some people might be hypersensitive to light or to sounds. So, we could work with the employee to find out what their needs are, what their sensitivities are, and how best we can adapt the environment to enable them to maximise their productivity.

00:16:01

CB

That's great advice. And William, thank you so much for joining me today, and keep in touch.

WV

I will. Thank you.

CB

And thank you for the wonderful advocacy that you're doing for the Sunflower. We're going to ask people who listen to this to share this recording so that they can then help to raise awareness of how important, what a beacon the Sunflower is to society and to people who need to wear it, who choose to wear it. And as you say, facing the light, drawing the strength, I really love that.

WV

All right. Thank you very much. Yes, it is a metaphor I thought of as I was writing the speech.

CB

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VO

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