

## Disability Pride Month 2024

Since 2015, July has been *Disability Pride Month* in the UK, creating an opportunity to celebrate people with different disabilities. It's a chance to explore their cultures, identities, and contributions and end the stigma around disability. Not only does this include physical disabilities, but also sensory, emotional/psychiatric, undiagnosed, and neurodiverse disabilities. I fall under the last two categories (undiagnosed and neurodivergent).

Growing up, education wasn't always the most welcoming place. I remember being told off in nursery for constantly holding a buttered cracker wrong. I didn't want to disobey, but the way they wanted us to hold it was so uncomfortable that I couldn't cope. Then, moving up to primary school, I had to sit cross-legged on the carpet. I hated the feeling of crossing my legs, I couldn't stand that either! I still didn't want to be a bad child, but I was often told to sit like everybody else. Then there was the incident where one day in Year 2 my tights were way too itchy and I couldn't cope wearing them. After being told off for fidgeting all day, I never wore tights again. Getting a little older, I stopped hanging out with the girls in my class. Their interests began to change and mature, whereas I was still very much an energetic child wanting to play and explore.

Secondary school was where being different really hit me. From the moment I walked through those doors I was a target for bullies. I could never cope in high school, often being sent out of lessons for crying whilst everybody laughed. I felt behind compared to everybody else in terms of interests and actions. They were all busy growing up whereas I was still very much childlike with little to no understanding of how to 'be normal like them'. It was (and still is) an incredibly isolating experience...

However, throughout my time in education, there has been one place where I have never felt different. One place that got me through everything. That place is called Girlguiding, and it's the most special place in my heart.

I started the organisation in Brownies on a Friday night, moving up to the Guide unit that took place straight after. One thing that I struggle with is transitions so, although unintentional, it really helped. I already knew most of the Guides from Brownies, the meeting place was in the same location, and it took place on the same night also. Guides was also the same period where I started noticing how different I was from others, and when I was going through the toughest years at school. It was like a reward for finishing the week, a chance to 'unmask' and just relax with friends. I became a completely different person at Guides compared to school because, even though I didn't fully understand it, I felt safe and unjudged there.

After COVID caused us to lose a few members of the unit and we returned to most of us being 13-15 years old, we put on grey uniforms and became Rangers. As somebody unable to cope with change, this was a perfect solution! The Ranger unit at this time was a small collection of Guides I was close friends with. Since its opening in 2021, we have grown massively in numbers! To this day, I would still say we are an extremely close group of people, and I never feel different or unaccepted.

Around the same time I began my time in Rangers, I had a friend who was in the process of getting an autism diagnosis. They spoke to me about how a lot of my symptoms matched up with the disorder. After countless hours doing my own research, I found the answer to so many questions I just realised I'd been asking...

Learning to understand my own needs has helped me become more included in guiding activities (as well as helped those around me understand me more). It can get extremely overwhelming as a large, joint Guide and Ranger unit (with a mixture of ages from 10 to 18). I'm able to just step out when needed and there's always a couple of Rangers who follow to check I'm okay. Throughout meetings, they'll discreetly see how I'm doing, checking if I need to step out again or not. The leaders are extremely supportive too, always recognising if I achieve something I previously couldn't have done. For example, we attend a

couple of camps every year involving raves. I struggle with this, as they often involve large crowds, loud music, and appropriate reactions. Thankfully, I bring ear defenders, I'm able to leave the crowd and rejoin whenever I want, and other Rangers are happy to go down with me and move at my pace whilst still having fun themselves. The leaders have recognised this through awards. My ear defenders also make a cool topic for conversation, as people try them on and then get surprised at how they then hear everything (for those wondering: the music is more muffled, people's voices are muffled but you can still hear them somehow, and you can hear yourself a bit louder)!

When I was 16, I became a Young Leader for Rainbows. A couple of weeks after I turned 18, the main leader had to leave the unit and I took over. I had never really led a unit properly beforehand so, whilst I was really excited, I was also terrified. The main thing that scared me was being unable to run it professionally due to my autistic traits. I'd never interacted with parents properly before, and it's very clear that I'm younger than most leaders (with a majority of people first meeting me assuming I'm under 18). Luckily, I had a great support team around me who pushed me out of my comfort zone and helped me to gain confidence. Every leader I've spoken to has had great advice and it has allowed me to develop my own way of leading. My 'childish interests' help me understand the children more as I know a lot about the different characters they talk about or bring in as toys. When the leaders get confused with what they are on about I'm always ready to explain how '*it's a game on this app called Roblox*' or '*it's an animated series on YouTube*'. Being 18, I can still attend Rangers as a young member and it's really helped to consistently provide a bit of time to continue something that I love whilst leaving the 'leader' part to others. **A huge thank you to all the leaders in Ormskirk Central Division, you are all incredible to both grow up and work with!**

One neurodivergent trait often talked about online are *hyperfixations* and *special interests*. A special interest is a fixated interest in a topic to an abnormal level, often to the point where it is the only thing on a person's mind and is a large factor in their joy and happiness. Not only can special interests bring joy, they can also guide a person in their future and help decide the choices they make. Whilst I've been in guiding since late 2013, it really became

my special interest in early 2022. Since then, almost everything I have done has been guiding-relating. Writing these blogs for region helps as they are usually about Girlguiding or a current hyperfixation of mine. Hyperfixations are like special interests, except they last a shorter amount of time and aren't usually permanent. My Eurovision, Matilda, and Inside Out 2 blogs? All themed around my hyperfixations!

Another thing that happened through me having a special interest on Girlguiding is creating the **GGDS**. I was scrolling through TikTok one day, looking at the limited amount of UK guiding content (which is thankfully growing!) when I came across a video of a Ranger from Anglia region showing off their badge tab. I messaged them and we got chatting. I'd had the idea of creating a Discord Server for Girlguiding members for a while, but with no idea how to even begin and gather members... I brought up the idea to them and we got started creating it. The server grew and grew, creating a welcoming space for Guides, Rangers, and Young Leaders aged 13-18 years old. We now have almost 200 members and an 18+ server releasing mid-August, all from a TikTok video of a badge tab and my neurodivergent brain!

At the end of the day, I am proud to class myself as disabled. Yes, there will be challenges in my life and it will never be easy, but there's so much joy out there. Being autistic isn't a part of me, it makes me who I am, and I'm proud to be who I am. It's allowed me to contribute so much to my community and to meet so many wonderful people. One day in the near future, I'm hoping to begin the diagnosis process and finally have on paper what's been known all along. To all of those who are also neurodivergent, have a sensory/invisible/physical disability, struggle with mental health, and are either diagnosed or undiagnosed, happy disability pride month and **be proud of who you are!**