

This will be the 18th annual Speaking for Ourselves panel at the national conference of the Autism Society of America. This panel provides an opportunity to hear first person accounts from four individuals on autism spectrum. A different group of panelists is chosen each year in order to give a variety of individuals an opportunity to share their varied life experiences. Panelists are chosen to reflect the diversity of the spectrum of individuals with autism. If possible, a mixture of gender, race, experience and functioning levels is preferred. Preference is given to having panelists from the area that the conference occurs in order to represent that area. The families and communities that the panelists represent often come out to cheer these individuals on and it is a wonderful opportunity for the panelist to share his or her thanks for their support.

This year our panelists are all from Florida. They are Jordan Jackson age 21 from Orlando, Michael Less age 21 from Orlando, Haley Moss age 14, and David Pedemonte-Forte from Coral Reef, Florida.

The panelists will tell about the difficulties that they encountered in their early life, their struggles with the educational and medical systems, the support of their families, the discouragements that held them back, and the successes that kept them going. The panelists will speak about their difficulties with social situations, their sensory differences, what they enjoy in life, their friendships in and beyond the autism circle, what they have learned about advocating for themselves and/or the employment they have had or hope to get. Panelist often tell about the misconceptions others have about autism Their ability to verbalize their insights may provide a benefit to parents, professionals and individuals with autism.

In addition, this panel is an opportunity for the audience to validate and encourage these individuals. So often in life, they have experienced failure or been excluded because of their differences. During this

session, we can tell them with our attention and applause, that we are proud of their efforts and progress. These individuals walk off the stage with a renewed faith in life, because they have been listened to and valued.

Panelists have ranged in age from 12 to in their 50's. Qualifications include a diagnosis of autism, PDD or Aspergers; ability to communicate from the stage to an audience, and the desire of the individual with autism to participate and share their story.

The Autism Spectrum Individuals panel has been a heartwarming, humorous and informative event for those who attend it each year at the national ASA conference. It has also become a cornerstone activity for individuals with autism who attend the conference to meet with others who have shared these challenges. During the session, individuals on the autism spectrum who wish to will be given the change to introduce themselves to the audience. Many people with ASD have meet through this panel.