IT WAS 2004. I WAS 17 YEARS OLD AND HAD BEEN TRYING TO SURVIVE HIGH SCHOOL.

BY ALEXANDER PLANK

To say that making friends was incredibly difficult for me would have been an understatement. My grades were suffering, and I had been recently diagnosed as an autistic person.

I was depressed and my parents didn’t know what to do; they were beside themselves and were afraid that I wouldn’t even make it to graduation. Something was missing in my life and I needed to fill this void. In an effort to find support, I went online to meet other people like me. Unfortunately, at the time, the few autism communities available had at most a couple hundred active members.

Consequently, I realized that I needed to create a new online community. I called it WrongPlanet.net because I felt as if I were
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from a different planet and had somehow, through some cosmic event, mistakenly crashed into Earth. This feeling is common among autistic people.

You see, autistic people can be very social, especially among our own kind. A lot of the problems we face in social interactions are the result of other people misinterpreting our intentions. We frequently try to communicate with our peers and can become very frustrated when we can’t fit in. The following quote from a Wrong Planet member sums up these frustrations:

Aspies [people with Asperger’s] are usually very intelligent; they can just lack an ability to formulate their opinions and knowledge in a socially acceptable way. ...It is hard for us to speak in person or on the phone even. We hear too much around us; we get walked over in conversations or do the opposite. Writing is just the preferred form of communication because it shows dedication to our thought. It also doesn’t allow you to interrupt and throw us off course, or off what we meant to say.

- Emoal6

Fostering a Community

Back in 2004, I had the idea that I needed to find others who were like me because these people wouldn’t just understand where I was coming from, but would understand me on a social level as well. What I mean by this is that I believed that I could foster a community of people who would not misinterpret my intentions because their brains would be wired similarly to mine.

It turns out that the niche I had identified in creating Wrong Planet filled a need for many others. After only 5 years, we now have a community of more than 33,000 people who have cumulatively posted more than two and a half million messages.

My website has grown to not only include individuals on the spectrum, but also a
large community of parents, professionals and siblings of those on the spectrum. What is even more interesting is the fact that these different sub-communities are able to not only coexist together, but also to help each other by answering one another’s questions and giving each other insight into their different perspectives and experiences.

**Interacting Online**

The Internet and social media (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter) have allowed autistic people and their families to communicate in ways that were not thought possible even 10 years ago. Autistic people are less likely to feel inhibited when they are sitting before a computer screen. The reason for this is because the social facade that exists while interacting in person is not required on the Internet. This makes us much more comfortable sharing personal details and makes it easier to connect on a more intimate level. The following Wrong Planet member writes about the stresses of direct conversations:

> I think that the child-like nature of my speech is caused by the stress and confusion of real-time conversation. I become very anxious knowing that someone is expecting a response immediately as this does not give me time to process what they have said or to translate my reply into something they can understand.
> - Aphonos

In many ways, the autistic mind is geared towards the types of interactions that occur on the Internet. We can be very literal, and the Internet requires people to be literal. For instance, even a neurotypical (a person who isn’t on the autism spectrum) will not know you're being sarcastic on the Internet unless you explicitly say so; for example, through the use of an emoticon (or smiley).

What’s great about interacting online is you can reach an entire “planet” of people with whom to interact. In essence, it has made the world even bigger and has allowed people like me to finally find other autistics with whom we can relate.

Here’s an example from my forum of someone introducing themselves to my community:

Subject: I’m normal; everyone else is crazy.

I just learned about asperger’s not 3 days ago, and have to say I’m shocked that everything that i know to be me is aspie symptoms. Certainly sheds light on why i stare at people (like Jane Goodall studying apes).

Starting to understand the wrong planet concept. . . i live in the sticks where a few shots of whiskey and no one can tell who’s who anyway.

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**Facilitating Connections Among Parents**

As I mentioned earlier, parents play a large role on Wrong Planet. When a mother or father connects to WrongPlanet.net, they frequently read the posts of those on the spectrum. I’ve heard from many parents who say that reading other autistics’ posts gives them valuable insight into the mind of their own children, who may or may not be speaking. I think this is an incredibly significant way to bridge the gap between an autistic person and their neurotypical parent.

I’m amazed at how positive people can be when they find hope on the Internet in others’ success and knowledge. When parents initially learn about a child’s diagnosis, they’re very influenced by the message they hear first, which may not be a positive one. Parents who initially find a network of support are better able to help their child. If parents find a more negative environment first, they are less positive and often become depressed or start looking for someone to blame. The following parent writes about the support
she received from fellow Wrong Planet members:

When I first joined WrongPlanet, I was a mess. My first son had been diagnosed with Asperger’s and I didn’t know much about it. I was scared that he wouldn’t be able to reach his potential. I was scared that my former happy, sunny child had disappeared, to be replaced by a very anxious, unhappy boy. I was suffering clinical depression and on anti-depressants.

I came to WrongPlanet and immediately many members stepped in to mentor me and my sons through.

We had therapy from an excellent clinic, but we wouldn’t have made such leaps and bounds without WrongPlanet.

- Smelena

Finding Love

Autistic people from my website have also met and fallen in love. These are people who may have never found anyone if they hadn’t been able to go online.

Another great thing to hear about is divorced parents of autistics meeting each other through the Internet and eventually getting married. It’s hard for these divorced parents to find understanding partners, so it makes sense that they would try to find a partner on an autism community site. According to Mandi:

I met my fiancée on the internet. I kind of stumbled into my relationship. We started out as friends, just talking and learning more about each other and going on “friend dates.” If chemistry is good, both people will feel the same way. When you both know that you really like each other, then you know that there is something special. Both of you have to be completely open and willing to talk and listen to each other. When a relationship is real, it will just flow together and happen naturally.

How Wrong Planet Has Helped Me

After creating Wrong Planet, I began to feel less alone in the world. I wasn’t as depressed and my grades improved from D’s and F’s to B’s and A’s. With the help of people on the dating section of my website, I was able to finally meet a girl and managed to graduate high school without being single.

College was tough for me, and I think I probably wouldn’t have survived it if I had been at it alone. Having the community I created was helpful in not feeling so isolated. I met an artist on my website who became my first long-term relationship.

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I began speaking at conferences and meeting others from my website in real life. I started obtaining advertising revenue for my website, which had opened many doors to me. Business prospects were growing and things were starting to look up. Then something happened.

It was the second semester of my junior year. I had been living in a house with my girlfriend, and things had been going great. I had switched my major to film and just purchased an expensive camera. UCLA invited me to come to their campus to give a talk about autism, so I flew out to Los Angeles in a luxury jet paid for by UCLA and stayed in a fellow Wrong Planet member’s mansion in Beverly Hills. I biked around Hollywood and ran into Steven Spielberg and Helen Hunt. Just when it seemed things couldn’t get any better, the stock market crashed and the economy went down the tubes.

I could no longer afford the lifestyle I had been enjoying when the economy was thriving. My girlfriend broke up with me, and I became seriously depressed. My grades started to suffer. It was now the last semester of my senior year. I had to move out of my three-story house and share a one-bedroom apartment. I struggled to afford college on my own.

But my website was like an old friend; things began to improve because of all the social skills I had learned there. Like other users who benefit from Wrong Planet, I too began to meet friends and started seeing other girls.

Although I had to take an extra semester to finish college, I created a documentary about autism that got a lot of attention. I started to get my finances in check and began to focus on how I could continue running my popular website (which costs hundreds of dollars a month to finance) and still afford to pay my rent. With time, I finally graduated with a degree in film and now I feel I have my whole life ahead of me. The economy is starting to look up and, most importantly, Wrong Planet is growing strong. I have to thank my parents for my success and for believing in me even when they were told I might not graduate high school.

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About the Author

ALEXANDER PLANK

Alexander Plank, a 23-year-old with Asperger Syndrome, is the founder of Wrong Planet, a web community designed for individuals and parents/professionals of those with autism, Asperger Syndrome, ADHD, PDD, and other neurological differences. For more information, go to www.WrongPlanet.net or email Alex at alex@AlexPlank.com.