



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (2<sup>nd</sup> Revision)

## First Autistic-Led Major Autism Event in Singapore *Life After Death Autism Forum 2019*

24 August 2019 – Singapore's first autistic autism advocate is promoting sustainable long-term solutions for autistic adults via the Life After Death Autism Forum 2019. Just like the earlier creation of Singapore's first autistic-led WhatsApp community, this is a ground-breaking project to prove that autistics are capable of leading the dialogue about autism.

Mr. Eric Chen's latest event brings together the most active autistic autism advocates in Singapore. It will also gauge the autism community's readiness to support the creation of the first autistic-led organisation in Singapore.

During this event, Eric will introduce the concept of Inclusive Equality, an equal partnership between autistic and non-autistics of mutual accommodation and support. It calls for both the elimination of discrimination against autistics as well as autistics empowering themselves to change their own lives. It encourages autistics to ask for accommodation, but not privileges. It believes that if autistics want to be treated equally, then they cannot use autism to justify negative attitudes (such as refusing to learn from others) and disruptive behaviour (such as harassing others).

Eric will also share about "hidden autistics", a poorly researched group of pioneer autistics who lack formal diagnosis. Many within this group have managed to build careers and find marriage partners without receiving official support. Although some of them eventually realise that they are on the autism spectrum, they see no reason to obtain a diagnosis. Eric believes that the support from this pivotal group will be essential to the success of large-scale autistic-led initiatives.

Eric believes that autism advocacy is not just about persuading mainstream society to accept autistics, but also to persuade fellow autistics to take responsibility for their lives. There are many well-intended projects that hire lots of non-autistic therapists, job coaches or other professionals to spoon-feed autistics to learn/plan/do things that they choose not to make the effort to learn/plan/do for themselves, but no projects that empower autistics to take the initiative to solve their own problems.

### **ABOUT ERIC**

Eric has a decade of experience with psychometric work and two decades using his self-taught IT skills. He has worked full-time for his current employer for over 7 years. He is currently studying for a Specialist Diploma in Applied Drama and Psychology. He has found his true purpose in life and succeeded in using his passion for self-improvement to overcome many issues such as low self-esteem and high anxiety.

Eric plans to study for a Masters in Counselling in Singapore and a Master of Expressive Arts Therapy in Hong Kong. This will allow him to obtain professional credentials and knowledge to create a course that can empower adult autistics without intellectual disabilities. Studying in Hong Kong will also give him the opportunity to build on his past contacts to create an international network of autistic-led organisations that will provide mutual support and learning opportunities to each other.

As there are currently no scholarships or grants for people like himself, Eric is considering using crowdfunding to create his own personalised scholarship. Taking the risk of exposing himself to media publicity again, Eric hopes that Singaporeans will be more supportive this time compared to the past when job interviews ended shortly after he disclosed that he was autistic.

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The autism forum will be held on Saturday, 28 September 2019, 1-5pm at the Lifelong Learning Institute. For more information, contact [eric@iautistic.com](mailto:eric@iautistic.com) and visit <http://iautistic.com/projects/life-after-death-autism-forum-2019/>

## Annex: Event Details

### PANEL 1: INCLUSIVE EQUALITY & EMPOWERED PARTNERSHIP

Representatives of the local autistic community will be invited to join a panel to share how caretakers can form an equal partnership with them (i.e. Inclusive Equality) to create sustainable solutions, so that they can continue to thrive even after their caretakers have passed on.

Inclusive Equality is an equal partnership between autistic and NeuroTypicals of mutual accommodation and support. It calls for both the elimination of discrimination against autistics as well as autistics empowering themselves to change their own lives. It encourages autistics to ask for accommodation, but not privileges. It believes that if autistics want to be treated equally, then they cannot use autism as an excuse to justify bad attitudes and unacceptable behaviour.

Examples of obstacles that impede mutual partnership support include a fragmented autism community with a silo mentality, the medical model that sees autism as a defect, the charity mindset that sees autistics as people to be pitied, persistent parental reliance on pseudoscientific autism therapies, inadequate training and qualifications for aspiring autistic advocates, discrimination by employers and insurers, and a parenting mentality that encourages autistics to pretend to be normal and ignore their own potential. The panel will examine these obstacles and propose practical ways to deal with them.

The goal is to have 6 panellists (3 males and 3 females). Priority will be given to autistics with a confirmed diagnosis and who are working adults. Face masks will be provided for those who prefer to obscure their faces. Each panellist can also opt not to use their real name and be addressed by a nickname assigned to them instead.

Eric will kick off this panel with a short talk introducing the concept of inclusive equality and why inclusiveness alone is insufficient. The panellists will take turns to add on to the talk. After this, the audience will submit their questions / suggestions / feedback using an app on their smartphone for the panellists to answer. Those with the most popular contributions (as indicated by the number of people voting for it) can be invited to share on stage.

### PANEL 2: DEALING WITH DECEPTION AND EXPLOITATION

Autistics often lack the support they need to develop their self-awareness, inner strength and wisdom. Without these, they are not ready to face a harsh world where nasty people bully, manipulate and exploit them. Eric will give a short talk about how autistics can develop the inner qualities that allow them to thrive despite the difficulties they face.

The autistic panellists will then discuss how to recognise the signs of dubious people and what the autism community can do to protect itself against them. Just as with the earlier panel, panellists will share their thoughts and the audience will then submit their questions / suggestions / feedback using an app.

Examples of case studies that may be discussed include:

- 1) A social enterprise owner who bullies autistics and uses them as tools to raise funds for her autism awareness work
- 2) A parent who meets autistic adults in private and proceeds to demolish their self-esteem under the guise of coaching them and providing emotional support
- 3) Fake friends who approach autistics during payday to get free drinks and treats, then disappear when the cash runs out
- 4) A foreign resident in Singapore who passes himself off as autistic to join autism chat groups and promote dubious business and investment opportunities
- 5) A medical degree graduate who worked as a clinic assistant but has not served her medical residency; yet she still presented herself as a medical doctor in order to promote pseudoscientific therapies provided by foreigner therapists with dubious reputations
- 6) A therapy centre which uses various misleading practices, such as featuring prominently an endorsement from a doctor in a renowned children's hospital who specialises in a field that has nothing to do with autism and children

### PANEL 3: BRAINSTORMING IDEAS FOR AUTISTIC THRIVING

The panellists will discuss key concerns of the autism community that can include:

- **Substitute Caregiving:** Finding ways to delegate and replace personal caregiver duties without compromising the care for autistics (e.g. forming an advisory committee of trusted people to advise on life decisions, moving the autistic to an affordable overseas care centre)
- **Investment Solutions:** Finding ways to use resources to provide for and protect autistics (e.g. community farms, adult care centres, social enterprises, insurance policies, annuities) in the long-term
- **Sustainable Success:** Finding ways for autistics to achieve their success that also help to provide for their own living expenses as much as possible (e.g. teaching autistics how to run a farm to grow food, starting a robot-proof business)
- **Living with Dignity:** Finding ways to help autistics feel valued, positive and happy (e.g. how to let autistics pursue their harmless interests instead of pressuring them to do chores)
- **Building Careers:** Finding ways to develop talents and create careers for autistics beyond the formal educational system (i.e. alternatives to just getting paper qualifications and climbing the corporate ladder)
- **Personal Development:** Finding ways for autistics to master advanced life skills, cultivate personal responsibility, develop resilience, form meaningful relationships and emerge as future leaders.
- **Combating Discrimination:** Finding ways to bypass or dispel the discrimination that is limiting autistic employability and potential (which includes addressing employers' concerns rather than trying to compel or shame them to hire autistics)
- **Making New Deals:** Finding ways for autistics and caregivers to help each other (e.g. fund scholarships for autistics who serve a bond to help the autism community)

Building on the concept of Inclusive Equality, Eric will speak briefly about the need to find sustainable solutions that go beyond mere survival. He will introduce some out-of-the-box ideas that can potentially transform the autism community, including helping those with intellectual disabilities and complex special needs. Just as with the earlier panel, panellists will share their thoughts and the audience will then submit their questions / suggestions / feedback using an app.

### WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS AUTISM EVENT?

- Not for Awareness / Sharings: We need practical solutions more than awareness.
- Not for Therapies / Cures: We make the realistic assumption that adult autistics will remain autistic.
- Not for Charity: We are looking for solutions outside the charity model.
- Not about Talks: We need fresh solutions for the future, rather than sharing past knowledge and experiences.
- Autistic Leadership: The project is started by and led by autistics for parents / caretakers, not the other way around.

### MESSAGE TO PARENTS / CARETAKERS

Dear Parents, boy boy and girl girl have grown up and now we understand some of the pain and sacrifices that you have gone through. We will try to help solve our problems. Will you accept our participation, however imperfect our efforts?

This event is a coming of age for the autistic community. It symbolises hope, not for autism cure / recovery, but that we autistics are willing to take responsibility for our own lives and share the burden with our caretakers. This event will be proof that autistics can stand as equals with parents and professionals; proof that autistics can be taken seriously. This event will plant the seed of true inclusion, providing a contrast to the token inclusion where autistics are seen as dependent on others and can only play the role of figureheads of the projects that are meant to help them.

We need fresh ideas and new blood. Is reminding existing insurance companies to be more inclusive the only way to obtain fairly priced insurance for autistics? Is asking for government support to build more day activity centres and provide more social welfare the only solution? Are job coaches and life skills training sufficient for autistics to thrive? Is setting up social enterprises based on the charity model the only way out? Let us come together to question our assumptions and explore new possibilities.