Hello, I’m Jeremy Ralph and written below is my story, this is how I write.

Today is world Autism awareness day, though in our house everyday is autism awareness day. My official diagnosis is level 1 autism spectrum disorder, ASD for short, more commonly referred to as high functioning autism. Growing up I always knew I was different, I attended both physiotherapy and OT sessions, I also attended early childhood intervention services(ECIS) but never understood why I was different and had to do those things, I attended mainstream school with some one on one aide funding through the education department, that meant I was able to attend school like any other child but at the same time I was able to get the support I needed to do so. In the playground I felt very much alone, didn’t really have any friends due to me being different and our family being the subject of nasty rumours, I was called names, I was mocked, the occasional bit of physical bullying, but what hurt the most out of all the bullying I endured wasn’t any of those 3 things, it was social exclusion, no one really wanted to play with me, wanted to be my friend or be in their groups for group activities or group work in class, one time my year 5 or 6 teacher witnessed this and had had a gut full and called out the whole class on it, she knew that despite my challenges, I always tried my hardest and put a lot of effort into everything I did, she said I was worth more than all of them, I was shocked and happy at the same time. Home should’ve been my safe place but I wasn’t even safe from bullying there as my siblings somehow felt the need to have a go at me, mum and dad did their best to pull them into line if they caught them in the act but they didn’t see everything because 9 times out of 10 my siblings would start on me when mum and dad’s backs were turned or when they weren’t around to pull them into line, they couldn’t punish what they couldn’t see, and I was very hesitant to dob them in for fear of making things 10x worse, so the vast majority of the time I just put up with it. I went through life not knowing why I was different, until my first year of college, I was struggling with a piece of English work, and the teacher in charge of the inclusion part of the college said that I have a mild form of autism and the questions set out in this English work would be quite difficult for me to answer, finally my challenges had a name, I’d heard autism thrown around in regards to me on a number of occasions but this was the first time it was explained to me in full. That same year I met Naomi(my now wife), I’d seen her in the classroom, sometimes with a camera in hand but it wasn’t until midway through the year that I started to get to know her more, it came about because she was doing an English assignment where she had to plan something she would do in the future, she chose to plan her wedding and the inclusion teacher came up with a brilliant idea of having a mock wedding on our mid year camp, Naomi asked who would be the groom? So our teacher approached me and asked if I’d like to be the groom and since it was not something I was asked everyday I said yes, and that decision ultimately changed the course of my life. Then some weeks later, we were boarding the bus for camp, I came straight out and said I’ve decided we’re officially going out(or something along those lines)that was a first for me, making a decision like that on impulse, something I almost never do. I started spending less and less time at home, opting to spend more time at Naomi’s, things with my siblings only got worse, anytime mum would bring me home from spending time with Naomi, I’d be greeted with “why did you have to bring that home?” Directed at mum referring to me, this just made me feel even worse than I already felt, eventually I’d had enough of it and Naomi’s mum let the

2 of us stay at her place until we could get a place together, we just had to pay our way, as you'd expect and I had no problem with that, not long after that we got our first place together, St Giles had transitional units up in Prospect Vale, we had 1 bed sit each with a shared bathroom in between, they were designed to help people with a disability transition into independent living, I think mum got a pleasant surprise with me being the first child to move out of home, she always thought I'd still be at home long after my siblings had left. I proposed to Naomi a bit over a year later and nearly 4 years after that we tied the knot for real. We welcomed our first child Maybelle into the world 3.5 years after tying the knot, when Maybelle was only about 4 months old when we got the long awaited news that a place had become available for us in Devonport, so we packed up our life in Launceston and moved to Devonport, we haven't looked back since.

In 2018 we welcomed child number 2 Harrison into the world, our life has just been one big roller coaster ride, things haven't been all smooth sailing for me, as I've struggled with mental health issues for some years as a side effect of my autism and also because of everything I went through in my childhood, have bounced around many different counselling services and at one point had managed to bury everything deep down but then came the 2021 Hillcrest tragedy, having connections to the school and being so close to home, everything came back to the surface and we knew at least a couple of the victims which only added to things. After that was when I learned that being on the spectrum puts me at higher risk of PTSD, I now strongly suspect I have that on top of my anxiety and depression, then we lost my nan 2 years ago and that certainly didn't help things but something good did come out of it over a year later, nan had left all her grandkids a small amount of money and I ended up using mine to pay to go to a Men's camp being run by the group of churches our church is now under, up in Queensland, I flew up entirely on my own and rendezvoused with everyone else who'd flown in for the camp, the first night we were given these planks of wood and we were to write our burdens on them, they would be called our burden sticks, the group from our church were gathered around a fire pot to write down our burdens and a few of our blokes opened up and told their stories, I surprised them and myself when I decided to open up and tell my story, I only managed to write down one thing on my stick but by the next night I'd filled it. One said that's the most he's ever heard me say in the time he's known me, we were to wear them at all times, only taking them off to sleep or shower. The next night we were to burn them in a big bonfire, as kind of a cleansing ritual, after that was when I got my new nickname courtesy of our lead pastor, Fearless Jeremy or FJ for short. I came home from that camp a new man kind of, my troubles were still there but I now had more tools to help me deal with it all, and I still have a long way to go mind you but I'm a lot better since coming back from that camp. I'm a passionate volunteer within our church, serving as a volunteer with our Heavens Kitchen program that is run by the community care branch of our church on Wednesday nights and also in our community Hub, setting up parties every Friday and also helping with dishes where needed, I have found my little niche in party prep and love what I do.

Autism has been quite prevalent on my dad's side of the family, particularly in the males as it's yet to miss a generation or any male on that side of the family, we're currently fighting to get a diagnosis for Harri as he requires some supports that require a diagnosis and also to get one for Maybelle as an assessment she had came back saying she in all likelihood has ADD/HD and there's enough evidence to warrant an Autism assessment, it's just been a never ending battle, fighting so called professionals that won't listen to us or think we're trying to label our children, service providers who don't communicate with each other and fail to communicate with diagnostic services, missing paperwork and a system that is overworked, underfunded and under-resourced.

A few myths about autism, Myth 1, it only affects kids and they outgrow it, wrong, autism doesn't end at 18, kids on the spectrum go on to become adults on the spectrum, autism is lifelong. Myth 2, all people with autism are the same, once again wrong, if you've met one person on the spectrum you've met one person on the spectrum, they call it a spectrum for a reason, no 2 people with autism will be affected in exactly the same way and are each unique in their own way.

Myth number 3, vaccines cause autism, this has to be one of the biggest myths there is, I've yet to see a single piece of evidence from a reputable source to suggest this is true. Only one person ever came to this conclusion and he conducted his research in a way that no other outcome was possible and that's not how things work in reality, you must allow for all possible outcomes.

This is my story, it may be a bit long winded but once I start typing it's hard for me to stop, I hope this serves as inspiration for others on the spectrum who are going through similar situations and struggles to mine. All that's left for me to say is stay strong, you are capable of more than you think you are and believe in yourself.

You are a leader not a follower.