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Teachers get a new perspective on autism at presentation

By Dan Champagne, Record-Journal staff

WALLINGFORD — Michael John Carley laughs uncontrollably every time he hears sheep "baa" or when he hears the French language used in rock 'n' roll or rap songs. In fact, that actually caused him to break up with his college girlfriend after she obtained a cassette of her favorite French rock band.

Carley shared his sense of humor with a group of around 40 teachers and members of surrounding school districts at the High Road Student Learning Center Friday afternoon to help them understand the world of those living in the autistic spectrum — who tend to have a different sense of humor from others, as his own story illustrates.

The autistic spectrum includes autism, Asperger syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder, Carley said.

Carley, the executive director of the Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership in New York City, was diagnosed with Asperger along with his 8-year-old son four years ago. Asperger syndrome is a form of autism characterized by deficits in social interaction and nonverbal communication.

The program, titled, "The Needs of the Adult Spectrum Community: A Personal and Professional View from Within," coincided with National Autism Month.

Karin Bertero, the education specialist at the High Road Student Learning Center, said 35 to 40 percent of the 110 students at the school are considered part of the autistic spectrum. The center is a state-approved special education school for kindergartners to 21-year-olds.

"To have an individual who is living the experience gives us such an insight into what it's like," Bertero said. "It's an amazing opportunity to learn that perspective. I truly believe this kind of dynamic is far above simply reading."

Carley explained society's changing attitude toward the spectrum by mentioning the film, "A Beautiful Mind," and said there never used to be movies where "nerds are the heroes."

"There's a real sexiness associated with mental activity and intelligence," Carley said. "This is something very new."

He also touched on the way attitudes in the workplace have changed.

Carley mentioned a fictional employee, "Andrew," who would involuntarily flail his arms.

"People used to go to the boss and complain and, of course, Andrew would have gotten fired," Carley said. "The attitude now is that they have to understand what Andrew is doing is completely harmless and is not threatening. The response from the boss now is that you're the one who has to change, and not Andrew. That's a huge difference."

Some misconceptions about those in the autistic spectrum include that they are angry and anxious, Carley said. He said being angry and anxious typically comes from feeling misunderstood for a long period of time.

Carley also said myths that people in the autistic spectrum are passionless, humorless and have no sexual appetite are false.

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He discussed his childhood and how he was misdiagnosed during a second-grade psychiatric exam at a school in Providence, R.I. The psychiatrist had the symptoms right, but attributed Carley's behavior to emotional difficulties caused by his father's death in the Vietnam War.

Before ending the two-hour program, Carley urged the teachers in the audience to work on three basic goals for students in the autistic spectrum. He asked them to find something students are good at, find that one thing they love that could become a career and teach them a strong work ethic.

"I really think as much understanding as we can get in any area really helps all of us," said Janice Lautier, a special education department head in the Wallingford school system. "This gave me another perspective. It gave me a different way of looking at something."

dchampagne@record-journal.com

(203) 317-2227