The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 9, Episode 9

Anthony Ianni | Autism, Basketball, and One Athlete's Dream

Tim Villegas (00:00):

Just a couple of weekends ago, I taught an online class for special education candidates about supporting students on the autism spectrum. And we talked about a number of things, including what is autism. This is my second go around for this class. And I repeated something that I thought was really helpful the first time. I had the class read the about autism page from the Autistic Self Advocacy Network. Now, if you don't know who ASAN is, they are a 501c3 nonprofit organization run by and for autistic people. And I often point to them as an example of where to look when finding who the autism experts are. So before we get into our interview with Anthony Ianni, author of "Centered: autism, basketball, and one athlete's dreams," I wanted to read ASAN's definition to you. It's a couple of pages long, but I think it's worth hearing.

Tim Villegas (01:08):

Autism is a developmental disability that affects how we experience the world around us. Autistic people are an important part of the world. Autism is a normal part of life. It makes us who we are. Autism has always existed. Autistic people are born autistic and will be autistic our whole lives. Autism can be diagnosed by a doctor, but you can be autistic even if you don't have a formal diagnosis. Because of myths around autism, it can be harder for autistic adults, autistic girls, and autistic people of color to get a diagnosis, but anyone can be autistic regardless of race, gender, or age. Autistic people are in every community and we always have been. Autistic people are people of color. Autistic people are immigrants. Autistic people are a part of every religion, every income level in every age group. Autistic people are women. Autistic people are queer and autistic people are trans. Autistic people are often many of these things at once.

Tim Villegas (02:21):

The communities we are a part of and the ways we are treated shape what autism is like for us. There is no one way to be autistic. Some autistic people can speak and some autistic people need to communicate in other ways. Some autistic people also have intellectual disabilities and some autistic people don't. Some autistic people need a lot of help in their day to day lives. And some autistic people only need a little help. All of these people are autistic because there is no right or wrong way to be autistic. All of us experience autism differently, but we all contribute to the world in meaningful ways. We all deserve understanding and acceptance. Every autistic person experiences autism differently, but there are some things that many of us have in common.

Tim Villegas (03:14):

Number one, we think differently. We may have very strong interest in things other people don't understand or seem to care about. We might be great problem solvers or pay close attention to detail. It

might take us longer to think about things. We might have trouble with executive functioning, like figuring out how to start and finish a task, moving on to a new task, or making decisions. Routines are important for many autistic people. It can be hard for us to deal with surprises or unexpected changes. When we get overwhelmed, we might not be able to process our thoughts, feelings, and surroundings, which can make us lose control of our body.

Tim Villegas (03:59):

Number two, we process our senses differently. We might be extra sensitive to things like bright lights or loud sounds. We might have trouble understanding what we hear or what our senses tell us. We might not notice if we are in pain or hungry. We might do the same movement over and over again. This is called stimming and it helps us regulate our senses. For example, we might rock back and forth, play with our hands or hum. Number three, we move differently. We might have trouble with fine motor skills or coordination. It can feel like our minds and bodies are disconnected. It can be hard for us to start or stop moving. Speech can be extra hard because it requires a lot of coordination. We might not be able to control how loud our voices are, or we might not be able to speak at all even though we can understand what other people say.

Tim Villegas (04:57):

Number four, we communicate differently. We might talk using echolalia, repeating things we have heard before, or by scripting out what we want to say. Some autistic people use augmentative and alternative communication or AAC to communicate. For example, we may communicate by typing on a computer, spelling on a letter board, or pointing to pictures on an iPad. Some people may also communicate with behavior or the way we act. Not every autistic person can talk, but we all have important things to say. Number five, we socialize differently. Some of us might not understand or follow social rules that non-autistic people made up. We might be more direct than other people. Eye contact might make us uncomfortable. We might have a hard time controlling our body language or facial expressions, which can confuse non-autistic people or make it hard to socialize. Some of us might not be able to guess how people feel. This doesn't mean that we don't care how people feel. We just need people to tell us how they feel so we don't have to guess. Some autistic people are extra sensitive to other people's feelings.

Tim Villegas (06:14):

Number six, we might need help with daily living. It can take a lot of energy to live in a society built for non-autistic people. We may not have the energy to do some things in our daily lives or parts of being autistic can make doing those things too hard. We may need help with things like cooking, doing our jobs or going out. We might be able to do things on our own sometimes, but need help other times. We might need to take more breaks so we can recover our energy. Not every autistic people will relate to all these things. There are a lot of different ways to be autistic. That is okay. Autism affects how we think, how we communicate and how we interact with the world. Autistic people are different than non-autistic people. And that's okay. ASAN advocates for a world where all autistic people have equal access, rights, and opportunities. Nothing about us without us.

Tim Villegas (07:22):

ASAN also has a great book called "Welcome to the Autism Community." Check it out if you get the chance. And before we get into Anthony Ianni's interview, I'm gonna tell you something that I told my

students a couple weeks ago, and it really comes from this ASAN definition. All autistic people deserve understanding and acceptance.

Tim Villegas (07:46):

My name is Tim Villegas, and you are listening to the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE. This podcast exists to build bridges between families, educators, and disability rights advocates to create a shared understanding of inclusive education and what inclusion looks like in the real world. To find out more about who we are and what we do, check us out at thinkinclusive.us or on the socials, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Also take our podcast listener survey. Your responses will help us develop a better podcast experience. Go to bit.ly/TIPodcastSurvey to submit your responses. We appreciate it. Today on the podcast, we talk to Anthony Ianni, the first autistic division one college basketball player and author of the book "Centered." We talked about what it was like growing up not knowing about his autism diagnosis until high school, playing for the Michigan state basketball team, and what he would tell young people on the autism spectrum about following their dreams. Thanks so much for listening. I'm glad you're here. And now our interview with Anthony Ianni.

Tim Villegas (09:04):

Okay. So today on the think inclusive podcast, I have Anthony Ianni, who is the author of the book "Centered: autism, basketball, and one athlete's dreams." He is a former basketball star on Michigan for the Michigan state Spartans. I cannot wait to talk to you about that. So welcome to the podcast Anthony.

Anthony Ianni (09:33):

Oh, thank you very much for having me, I'm excited be here.

Tim Villegas (09:36):

So why don't you, why don't you just introduce yourself to our audience? Our audience is mostly educators. So some special education teachers, some general education teachers. We have principals and district administrators that listen, and then we also have families of children with disabilities. So in case no one knows who you are, go ahead and introduce yourself to our listeners.

Anthony Ianni (10:05):

Absolutely. So I'm Anthony Ianni, I am a current national motivational speaker and autism self advocate. A little bit about my background. When I was four years old, I was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder, which is part of the autism spectrum. And at age five, a group of doctors and professionals told me that because I have autism, I would barely graduate from high school. Never go to college, never be an athlete and likely end up in a group institution with other autistic individuals, just like myself for the rest of my life. I wasn't told this till going into my freshman year of high school. So that kind of became my motivation to go and prove those people and then the other doubters or naysayers I had my life wrong. Had to work hard at everything, whether it was school, basketball, my social life especially.

Anthony Ianni (10:47):

And I had a lot of support from, you know, not just my family, but from my teammates, my coaches, my teachers, my friends. So I ended up graduating from high school in 2007, where I then went on grand valley state university for two years on a full scholarship for basketball. Didn't quite work out for me

there. So I decided to leave grand valley state to fulfill my lifelong dream, which was to play for a certain coach at a certain university. So I ended up leaving for to go play for coaches in the Michigan state Spartans where I was a walk-on for two years, my senior year coaches award me a fullbright scholarship. I was a part of two big 10 championship teams team, the one, the big 10 tournament title team that went to a final four. Played with a great group of guys who I'm proud to call all of my brothers to this day.

Anthony Ianni (11:28):

But during my time at Michigan state, I actually became the NCAA's first division one college basketball player with an autism diagnosis at that time. So I'm still proud of that title to this day. And I also got my bachelor's degree in sociology from Michigan state, which is social science. So so now I've been doing motivational speaking for the last nine years whether that's going into schools, talking to grades three through 12 doing autism conferences, events, speaking to sports teams universities. So, so yeah, that's kind of me, I'm also husband and father to two beautiful, handsome sons. So my, I got a six year old Knox and a three year old son named Nash. So yeah, so I stay, stay pretty busy, but that's pretty much me in a, in a nutshell.

Tim Villegas (12:09):

Awesome. Awesome. So are your son's named after basketball players? Just curious.

Anthony Ianni (12:16):

No. So actually my, a lot of my friends and even some of my high school players, I helped coach girls basketball here in Levonia. And you know, when Knox was born, everybody was thinking, oh, you know, connections at Knoxville, Tennessee. I'm like, no, like my wife got the name from Dead poet society, one of the characters is named Knox. And so she was just a big fan of it. And then Nash, we always talked about Nash, you know, being our firstborns first name, but, you know, we went with Knox and we were always a big fan of Nash. And so after Nash was born, some of my basketball players were sending me texts saying, you know, Knoxville and Nashville, you're gonna name your third kid Louis after Louisville. And I'm geez. So, so I get that question, asked me all the time, but you know, a lot of people really love their names and we really wanted to come up with names that, you know, not a lot of people have even heard of or even used. So, but yeah, I love being a dad though. It's you know, it's a lot of work though, but you know, I wouldn't trade anything for it.

Tim Villegas (13:11):

Awesome. so you, in the, well, let's talk about your book first. Let's talk about why you wanted to write it. So I mean you have obviously a fantastic story right meeting Tom Izzo and then kind of like deciding from the very beginning, like, this is what I want, this is my dream. Right. but you know, at the other end of it, after your basketball, after, you know playing basketball and now as a father and motivational speaker, so what was the reason behind writing the book.

Anthony Ianni (13:48):

Obviously for multiple reasons. You know, obviously I wanted to educate people more about what autism is because there are a lot of folks out there who may see me speak and then automatically get that assumption of, well, how is he on the autism spectrum? Because he looks like a, you know, normal person and it's just like talking one on one with somebody, but I've also told people, you know, about my background being on the spectrum, which is I'm very black and white. Like if somebody says

something to me today, I may take it the complete opposite sometimes. You know, growing up as a younger kid, I had a tough time understanding nouns, verbs, idioms, sarcasms, jokes. I had a really tough time dealing with fire drills, loud noises, crowd noises from Michigan state football and basketball games that I could barely go to.

Anthony Ianni (14:30):

Cause a lot of that, a lot of that stimulation from the arenas too much of an overload for me. And I wanted people to read more, more. I wanted people to read about that and you know, not only did I want people to be educated about what autism is, but I wanted, you know, for those who maybe are not affected by autism, if they're going through some tough times in life to read my story and get as much hope and inspiration as they can out of it. And you know, the one thing I've always told people that about this book is that it's not just a Michigan state thing. And you know, I I've had a conversation with a couple of with a couple of fans, whether they're Michigan, Ohio state Penn state and Notre Dame, whatever, you know, a lot of them said, well, is this mainly just about Michigan state?

Anthony Ianni (15:10):

I'm like, no, like it's more than that. Like I'm like, I would always say to like a Notre Dame fan, like Rudy wasn't just about Notre Dame. It was more than that. Or, you know Glory Road was not just about Texas Western's basketball team. Like it was, there was, there was messages behind those movies behind those stories. And so it's the same with, you know, with the book, like there's a lot of messages and stories in there and, and we kind of did a few things too that, you know, I don't think a lot of people would do. So for example, I don't wanna give too much of the book away, but you know, we put some of my IEP evaluations in there

Tim Villegas (15:41):

And yeah, I saw that. I saw that. Yeah, mm-hmm.

Anthony Ianni (15:43):

So, so we kind of looked back on that and because my co-author Rob keys to help me write the book he asked me if I wanted to put those evaluations in there and I, I really hesitated at first because there's a lot of personal things written in those evaluations that I look back on and I'm like, yeah, I'm not really too proud of that. Or you know, that, that was stuff outta my control. Cause I was six years old at the time. I didn't know any better. But then, you know what I thought about not putting the evaluations in there, you know, Rob says something to me that'll always stick out in my mind forever as an author, which is don't do what's best for you the author, do what's best for your readers. Because you know, people who are gonna read these evaluations, whether it's educators, professionals students, families affected by autism in some way, like they're gonna look at these evaluations and go, wow. Like look where Anthony a was in kindergarten, look where he ended up being by the time he was a freshman in high school. And so Rob wanted me to sleep on it to give us some thought, but I didn't even sleep on it cause I waited 20 minutes and I called him right back and I said, all right, let's do it. So but we really wanted to show people too, like this is the effects that autism had on me as a younger kid and this is the effects it still has on me to this day. And so, you know, overall we just really wanted to educate people and obviously give people the hope that hope and inspiration that they're trying to look for today.

Tim Villegas (17:00):

Yeah, I think it comes across in a powerful way. So I don't know if you know this about me, but I was a special education teacher for, for many years, 16 years in public schools. Okay. Wow. And so I would was one of the people writing the, the reports, you know what I mean? So it something that I thought about when, you know, when I saw, you know, the excerpts in the book was, wow. It's like you know, I am I'm writing when I, when I wrote for these reports. Right. They, I mean, they're of course private and confidential. Right. But right. But they tell a story, right? They tell a story of the person that I'm writing about. And I always knew that. But to see it in a different context, it was like, oh, that, you know, that reminded me of the feeling of sitting down and writing down, you know, observing a student, coming down, seeing my computer and writing and what that really means and what that's trying to communicate, you know, to whoever, whether it's a parent or someone trying to help or, you know, 10, 15 years down the road, you know, when you're writing a book.

Tim Villegas (18:15):

There's something you said at the beginning where you talked about, you know, you go and you speak and people are like, mm, do you like, you really have autism? You want to, you know, so I wanna wanted to know you know, what's your reaction and kind of, where do you, where do you think that's coming from? Like that question?

Anthony Ianni (18:38):

I think it's just based on, you know, people looking at me as a person because you know, whenever people see me or meet me for the first time, and then I tell them my story about being diagnosed with autism, the, their initial reaction is, well, how, like, I just don't see it because of the way you act with people because of the way you present yourself in public as a professional. And you know, I've had some people come up to me and say, well, you don't have those, you don't have those kind of characteristics. You know, a person with autism would have. And I would always pose the question of all right, well, what characteristics are you talking about? You know, I've had people say to me, you don't look like a typical person with autism. And my response always is, well, what is a typical person with autism supposed to look like?

Anthony Ianni (19:21):

You know, it's like, you know, some people, you know, have never seen. So I'm six foot nine, I'll use this, you know, this may be good. A good example. I don't know. So I'm six, nine. I'm very, very, very tall, you know, a very tall individual. Like some people just look at me and they'll gimme like, just stares, like this, like looking at me like, it's one thing if elementary school kids do it to me because you know, they're 9, 10, 11 year olds. It's funny. But like, you know, when, when an adult does it to me, I'm like, man, it's, it's like, you guys never seen a, a really tall person before, like you never person before. Like, so for example, if you're hanging around me and my friends and my friends would be super sarcastic in the group or even in a group chat. And I can't like, I can't tell sometimes if my best friend from high school is joking with me or he's being serious.

Anthony Ianni (20:07):

And those are a lot of the things I struggle with to this day. And like, you know, sitting at a dinner table with people and like people joking around, like I don't catch jokes really well because that's, that's part of the language aspect. I struggle being on the spectrum. And so so, but I get, you know, I'm always gonna have people, you know, come up to me or just but I always ask people the question whenever I

do my presentations at conferences. And so I'll bring up the question of all right before I started speaking and you've read my story, but then you heard me speak who automatically in this room assumed that Anthony Ianni doesn't have autism. Like, because they, they don't see it. And a, and a good 70, 30 of the room will raise their hands. And I'm like, Hey, I'm not offended by it.

Anthony Ianni (20:48):

I get it all the time. Because, you know, I always tell people, like, if you sit down for two, three hours with me, whether it's having dinner or having lunch, breakfast, a coffee or tea, whatever, like I've, I've always told those individuals, like I guarantee you'll walk away from that conversation, having a better understanding of where I am of where I'm at on the spectrum. And that's another reason why I wanted to write the book too, is because, you know, you will like the first nine chapters, you get to read more about what I was like as a kid. And when you read those chapters, you'll walk away from those and go, okay, now I understand why Anthony was diagnosed on the spectrum because this is what he said and did as a younger kid. This is what bothered him. This is what triggered him.

Tim Villegas (21:29):

Yeah. So, and that, I think that comes across in the book, you know the not shying away from it or not trying to separate yourself from autism. Right. Which I feel that, you know, some people, some people feel like they need to do that. You know, it's kind of like this idea of overcoming your disability. So like, right. So I'm wondering about, like, I'm wondering about that. You know, what your, if you, if you could expound on that idea of, you know, you have embraced your autistic identity as far as like, this is who I am. Have you, had you always felt that way or did you, do you feel like, well, like I have to overcome my autism to be who I really am or whatever.

Anthony Ianni (22:20):

No, I really didn't have that mindset of, I need to overcome my autism to become who I am today. You know, in high school, like I, I just found out going to my freshman year of high school. I just found out like what my diagnosis was. I knew something, I did things and said things that were completely different and out of the ordinary from everybody else as a younger kid. So I kind of had an idea of, okay, well I have a disability. I don't know what it is. So, but then when my parents finally told me, well, my diagnosis was, you know, it all made sense to me, but at the same time, like the only thing I was focused on in high school was proving every single doubter and, you know, doctor and professional wrong, who said, I wasn't gonna achieve anything in my life because of autism.

Anthony Ianni (23:03):

Like I was, I was not gonna let their words define my future. And I wasn't gonna let autism define what do in my life because only one person was gonna define what I was gonna do in life. And that was myself. And so that was kind of my, like, I didn't even think about, you know, autism on the basketball court. I didn't think about autism, like in the classroom. Like I, like, I was still reminded though, because I had the accommodations for test taking. I had the accommodations when I came to my resource room and my IEPs and et cetera. So, and when I got to college, like the goal was to graduate, the goal was to be at Michigan state. The goal was to win a big 10 championship, make it to a final four and maybe win a national championship during my time there.

Anthony Ianni (23:43):

I didn't really embrace of being proud of having autism until after I graduated from Michigan state, because the realization of finally graduating, but also realizing that you proved every doctor and professional in your life wrong, who said, you couldn't get to this point and you got there despite having autism. But at the same time, you made a lot of history in your life because of being on the autism spectrum. So that's when I embraced it fully instead of myself, all right, you need to be proud of who you are and what you are diagnosed with, because if you do that, other people are gonna see that. And some people will follow you because they'll embrace who they are. They'll embrace what they're proud for. And I actually spoke at a at a charter academy in grand rapids Michigan for five years ago.

Anthony Ianni (24:32):

And I had a young student, a young fifth grader. And so after the presentation, I did a private group meeting with an all autism classroom. And so I had a kid raise his hand and say, ask me, are you proud to have autism? Because I'm not like, I just feel like that I'm alone. Like, I feel like that, you know, some people can't relate to what I go through. And, and I flat out said to 'em yes, I am very proud of having autism because autism is part of me. Like autism helped me become who I am today. Autism helped me make history, you know, not once, but twice in my life in multiple ways. And so, but then when I mentioned to the young man that we have over 3.5 million people in the United States who have autism, that number may be more cause that was five years ago when I said that.

Anthony Ianni (25:20):

So I'll have to kind of look up and see what the stats are for that. But it was over 3.5 million. And when I mentioned that stat to him, he was away by that. He was like, wait, what? Like there's 3.5 million people in our country that are like me. I'm like, yeah, there are. And so that's why I'm proud to not only be on the autism spectrum, but I'm part, I'm proud to be part of a great community, the autism community. And so, and that's a big reason why I do what I do today as a self advocate is I just do what I do, you know, cause it's a job. I do what I do for the people in my life, my family, I do what I do for the community, the autism community.

Tim Villegas (25:56):

You were talking to another young, like a young person, like let's say on the spectrum and you met them what, what's kind of your big message to them. Whether it's from the book or just your own life, like what is the, what is the one thing that you want to communicate to, to a young person on the spectrum?

Anthony Ianni (26:20):

Don't let anybody tell you, you can't do anything in life despite having autism. If you have dreams or goals in life, like go get your dreams and goals. Don't let anybody tell you, you ever or can't do anything because autism doesn't define you at the end of the day. Like you define yourself. And that's my message that I've always had to, to young people on the autism spectrum is that, you know, a lot of folks, a lot of kids I've met and a lot of students I've met with autism. Like they have a lot of dreams and goals and aspirations. Like they wanna go to college, they wanna graduate, they wanna be police officers. They, they wanna be athletes down the road in whatever sport it is. And here's a good example for you. So the first school I represented at my entire career, it was outta middle school.

Anthony Ianni (27:03):

It was over nine years ago around this time. And you know, so I do a lot of anti-bullying presentations in schools. So I get word, I get a phone call the next day from this mom who has a son with autism telling me that her son was bullied for five years because her, because her son's bully knew he had autism. And after the presentation, the bully ended up apologizing to her son. And I was blown away by that. And I actually stayed in touch with the family over the years. And so, and I find out from his mom that because of my story, her son wanted to go to a major university and graduate. And so he ended up being a very, very good high school wrestler and he ended up graduating from Ferris state university. And now he works in the Kalamazoo county. I'm sorry, the Ionia county Sheriff's department.

Anthony Ianni (27:56):

He's a police officer cause that's what he wanted to do ever since he was a kid. And when I hear stuff like that, I'm like, man, like, you know what? He did all this stuff that he said he was gonna do and he didn't let, he didn't let autism get in the way of it instead he did the opposite, he embraced it. And so I, I stay in touch with this young man to this day and you know, so not only did it become, you know, you know, a bond, but it became a friendship. I, I got a friendship out of it too. And so, but that's why I always tell kids that, Hey, anything you have set in life as far as goals and achievements. Like they are possible. They are very possible because you know, at the end of the day we actually don't dream our lives. Cause at the end of the day we actually live them. And that's always a message I'm always gonna tell a young person with autism, no matter what

Tim Villegas (28:45):

Where can people find more, find more about you and your book?

Anthony Ianni (28:54):

So they can go to my website, which is anthonyianni.com. If they would like to purchase the book, it's also available on Amazon and as well as iupress.org and Barnes and Nobles.

Tim Villegas (29:06):

Awesome. Are you on the socials or anything? Facebook. Instagram.

Anthony Ianni (29:10):

Oh yeah. Come on. I'm on all three of them. So my Twitter handle is @AI44LYD. Facebook's just my name, Anthony Ianni, and then and then my Instagram name is at @aigamechanger44.

Tim Villegas (29:29):

Thanks for sharing that. That, that was that. I appreciate that. Appreciate that story. And, and thank you for sharing your story with our listeners. I think this is gonna be really enlightening and whoever is listening, make sure to check out centered by Anthony Ianni and check out his website and everything on the socials. So Anthony Ianni thank you so much for being on the think inclusive podcast. We appreciate your time.

Anthony Ianni (29:59):

No, thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

Tim Villegas (30:07):

That will do it for this episode or the think inclusive podcast. Subscribe to the think inclusive podcast via apple podcast, the anchor app, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcast. Have a question or comment? Email us your feedback at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons Veronica E, Sonya A, Pamela P, Mark C, and Kathleen T for their continued support of the podcast. When you become a patron, your contribution helps us with the cost of audio production, transcription, and promotion of the think inclusive podcast. And you could even get a shout out like the fine people we just mentioned. Go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast to become a patron today and get access to all our unedited interviews, including our conversation with Anthony. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education. This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at mcie.org. We will be back in a of weeks with another best of think inclusive episode volume two to round out 2021. Also, you might have noticed a few more bonus episodes in the podcast lately. That is because we are now publishing our newsletter, the Weeklyish, as a podcast, along with the video and text versions, just in case you couldn't get enough inclusionist content. Thanks for your time and attention and for listening. Until next time, remember inclusion always works.

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