



News Release

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[Nancy Livingston](#)
Public Relations
651-779-3222
Fax 651-779-3470

[Century College](#)
3300 Century Avenue North
White Bear Lake, MN 55110

Autistic People Can Live Successful Lives, Grandin Tells Century Audience

The largest crowd ever assembled on the Century College campus heard internationally-known author Dr. Temple Grandin deliver a message of hope to autistic people, their families and their educators on Wednesday Oct. 20.

“I didn’t have speech at age three, and a lot of people thought I was mentally retarded. Various doctors recommended that I be institutionalized,” said Grandin, addressing a crowd that filled the East Campus Lincoln Mall, the balcony on second floor and three additional classrooms. “My mother pushed me, and I worked hard on my social skills and my job skills. I had a sewing job when I was 13 and I took care of nine horses when I was 15. The autism is secondary. You have to focus on a career to have a satisfying life.”

During her talk, Grandin shared MRI scans of her brain compared to the normal brain, and explained the differences.

Autistic people, she noted, can be very intelligent but a lack of social skills, a tendency to fixate on things and a hypersensitivity to touch and noise can make it challenging for them to lead productive lives. In school they are often labeled “geeks and nerds” and can be picked on relentlessly, particularly high school.

“I was teased horribly,” Grandin said. “The cafeteria and the parking lot were particularly awful. They called me ‘tape recorder’ because I repeated things.” Because she thinks in pictures, she said she had more experiences and pictorial references in her mind as she got older that allowed her to vary her speech. Her social interactions became more conventional as the years passed.

“You have to have hands-on learning in the schools,” said Grandin. “Get kids making things in art, woodshop, auto mechanics and home economics. Get them out of the house and doing things. They can’t be just sitting at home playing video games. Take a kid’s interest and build on that. I was not interested in studying until I discovered that I wanted to be a scientist. If you want kids to be interested, you’ve got to show them interesting stuff.”

Grandin noted that if video games had been around when she was a child, she would have been obsessed with them. “But if you have a 30-year-old autistic son in the basement playing video games all day, that is not good,” she said. It is possible to change that behavior, she said, although it gets harder as people get older. “Autistic people are learning all the time,” she said. “But I have seen many that are too sheltered. They have to learn how to shop, order food in a restaurant and run a bank account. I had to learn table manners - that was really drilled into me - and I had to sit through church.” Grandin told people during her book signing that when she behaved badly, such as punching a hole in a wall, her parents made her fix the wall.

For autistic people, she said, living life is like learning how to act in a play. But she noted that she knows many autistic people who are employed and living productive lives. For example, some of the geniuses in Silicon Valley have Asperger's Syndrome, she said. "I am a big believer in getting portfolios of work together. Just stay away from the suits," she advised. "Don't get the suits ticked off."

Grandin believes that many autistic people are overly medicated, but she said she wouldn't be where she is today without anti-depressants. "A little anti-depressant is very effective," she said. "I am worried about the smart autistic kids who are so loaded on drugs, they can't even think."

She also advised people to get plenty of exercise and use special lights during the dark days of winter. "It helps with the depression," she said.

Grandin's lifelong interest in the sensory-based world of cattle led her to do extensive work on the design of handling facilities. Half the cattle in the United States and Canada are now handled in equipment she has designed for meat plants.

Grandin obtained her bachelor's degree from Franklin Pierce College in 1970, and in 1975 she earned her master's degree in animal science at Arizona State University for her work on the behavior of cattle in different squeeze chutes. Grandin was awarded her PhD in animal science from the University of Illinois in 1989 and is currently a professor at Colorado State University.

"Good teachers are what really matters for autistic people," she said. "Some teachers just have the knack. They just know how to get things out of kids."

Temple Grandin was the subject of an HBO movie starring Claire Danes called "Temple Grandin." This year, it won seven Emmy awards.