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Oregon Attorney
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Thrive in Law, Thrive in Life • ISSUE NO. 130 • SUMMER 2026

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Conversations with Neurodivergent Lawyers

by Kyra Hazilla and Bryan Welch

Hearing from neurodivergent lawyers about their experiences in their own words is an important part of understanding neurodiversity in the legal profession. OAAP Attorney Counselors Kyra Hazilla and Bryan Welch interviewed two Oregon lawyers who identify as neurodivergent. In the conversations that follow, they share insights from their personal journeys, including the decision whether to disclose, the stigma they still feel, common misunderstandings, what they wish their colleagues knew, and the neurodivergent superpowers they bring to their legal careers.

Q&A with Kyra Hazilla

Kyra: Have you disclosed your neurodivergence and what influenced your decision?

Yes. Initially it was mostly to avoid being yelled at. I was hoping that disclosing would help, but instead I learned that people really don't know what neurodiversity means. I remember telling a colleague that I was neurodivergent. They thanked me for telling them, which was so reassuring to me. However, within two weeks, they were back to yelling at me.

Now that I am in a public-facing role, there is a decent chance that some of the people who are appearing in front of me are also neurodivergent. If they disclose, I will also disclose. It seems to be very helpful for people because I do actually understand and can tell people what to expect. I find that disclosing is better than not disclosing, but occasionally, I find myself expected to be the voice of ALL neurodivergent people, which is a bit awkward.

Because I have disclosed, I have had people actually admit openly to me that they discriminated against me because I am neurodivergent. Though that was not what I was hoping would happen when I disclosed, it did allow me to find the path toward my current role.

Before I was aware of the label, especially as a younger person, navigating the neurotypical world was overwhelming and confusing. I realized that's how many people experience the court system. In my current role, the way I process information informs how I describe things to people. It is so satisfying to demystify the process for others by providing information in a way that would have been helpful for me. I try to be as transparent as possible.

Do you think people should disclose their neurodivergence?

If you think it would be helpful in terms of improving your ability to work and communicate effectively, then yes.

A good portion of my comedy stand-up set featured the fact that I was neurodivergent, so basically I disclosed during every performance.

I sought out the diagnosis when I was talked into going back on stage by a friend after I had practiced law for over ten years. I needed a "hook" but can't juggle or do impressions, so I thought I would be the "Aspergian comic." After many calls to neuropsychology professionals who kept asking "How old is your child?" I finally found someone who did adult assessments. It was incredibly liberating to be able to not have to worry about presenting myself in a way that didn't freak neurotypicals out. I totally turned off my internal editor. I'm not sure how I feel about blowing the curve on Simon Baron-Cohen's Autism-Spectrum Quotient test though...

What do you wish your colleagues understood?

Amazingly, my current colleagues GET me. Remarkably, these are people I used to appear in front of, and our relationships are very different than they used to be.

What is your superpower?

My superpower is that I am aware that I don't have a superpower. However, for purposes of this question I would say it is my ability to deconstruct the law to make it accessible to me, and, by extension, to others. It positively affected my practice as a lawyer—I wouldn't have moved to my current role without first understanding myself as a lawyer.

What's the most common misunderstanding about neurodivergent people?

That we are emotionless. We feel emotions, we just don't express them the same way you do. We rely much less on hugging.

Q&A with Bryan Welch

Bryan: When did you first recognize your neurodivergence?

I was diagnosed later in life. I had a history of overworking and burnout that wasn't being fixed through rest, etc. So I sought an ADHD diagnosis and easily passed the screening. And

then it clicked for me, all of my history growing up, of struggling in school, starting around age 11, maybe even 10, probably earlier than that. I really noticed it, having to spend lots of extra hours studying. It sort of became an “a-ha” moment, thinking through not just school and career, but also relationships and habit formation. It has been an uphill battle.

Have you disclosed your neurodivergence at work?

I have not made a specific disclosure to my supervisor or HR. But I did start to experience some borderline retaliation activity by a coworker, so I informed my HR person via email that although I have an ADA-covered disability, I wasn't asking for accommodation at this time. But I wanted it on record in the event that I need an accommodation in the future. So, I've sort of laid the groundwork and that gave me some confidence. I have also shared it with a couple of colleagues when they disclosed to me that they're ADHD. I've felt some relief knowing I'm not alone. I still worry about the stigma and potential retaliation. I haven't otherwise disclosed it in a positive way. It's been more of a defense mechanism.

So your nondisclosure is because of the stigma and fear of retaliation?

Yes. And when it comes to the stigma, I still have concern. So, there are two things in the practice of law that I think can rub against an ADHD brain. One is keeping up with deadlines, and the other is how you communicate. The issue is how our neurodivergence can show up in both of those areas. I think there's still a commonplace misunderstanding that we can control ADHD—people can control their neurodivergence—and that it's sort of a moral failing or laziness that leads to some of our executive dysfunction. There's a stigma around mental differences and accommodations. But I think specifically within the law, there's an expectation that lawyers should have it all together, and we're very punctual and precise. So if I disclose that I have ADHD, I fear being looked down upon as less intelligent, less capable, rather than it being an explanation that “Oh, there could be a difference in function when they're overstimulated.”

What is a common misunderstanding about neurodivergent lawyers that you've encountered?

I think the intensity that neurodiverse lawyers can have around protecting their clients, or about an issue they think is of great concern, can be viewed as adversarial or aggressive. The reality is that we have a lot of passion, and things feel very urgent, and so when we're dealing with clients who could have real consequences that could affect their life or safety, I feel activated as a neurodivergent person to do my best for them. And I find that some people misinterpret that passion as aggression, or being a know-it-all, or they don't see my assertiveness in a good light. So I think there's a misunderstanding regarding communication style. I also think that people use the idea of ADHD as a sort of crutch to explain how or why they aren't performing, versus, recognizing that there really are true neurological differences, and we are living in a neurotypical world, doing our best. I think we have really good intentions most of the time.

What do you wish colleagues understood about working with you?

In general, our society could benefit from having some more patience and not treating everything so urgently. I actually think sometimes neurodivergent people are canaries in the coal mine of evidencing how overstimulation can lead to overwhelm and burnout. And I think that's actually more about the pace of our society—the text messaging, calls, emails—all this expectation of responsiveness is actually more of the problem than an issue of neurodivergence. So I'd rather my colleagues realize that we have assets to offer, rather than just slowing them down, or whatever the heck they're worried about.

What do you think is the biggest challenge you've faced as a neurodivergent lawyer?

I think perfectionism is a really challenging trait that many neurodivergents struggle with, and the practice of law is ripe with opportunities for fear-based thinking around perfectionism. I find that sometimes the standards are unrealistic, and the pace is extremely challenging. The other challenge for me is communication

style and recognizing how I come across in an email or in a meeting. I feel I'm being to-the-point and assertive, but that can be viewed as aggressive. The practice of law involves a lot of communication and relationship building, so it can be challenging to continue to have to self-regulate in difficult conversations and difficult matters.

Do you consider yourself having a superpower related to your neurodiversity?

Absolutely!! I think that I have a really good heart and have strong empathy skills. I've never struggled with the question of "How do you help people feel included in the room when there are different voices, different people?" Because that's come very naturally to me ever since I was a kid. So I think my compassion helps me be a good person, and that's something I value. I also think I recognize patterns in a way that I can attribute to neurodivergence. I'm a systems thinker, and that results in better legal advice because I'm thinking a few steps ahead and can leverage some of that broader thinking—systems thinking. It also helps me in my job because I have to think of many different regulatory provisions and schemes at the same time. My work is quite complex, but my neurodivergence helps me do that, I believe. I think it helps me to juggle a lot of balls at the same time. I just need the systems in place that help me, that keep me on track to get my work done. When this sort of brain is harnessed, I think it's an asset.

What is one thing you think the legal community or the profession could do to better support or be inclusive of neurodivergent lawyers?

I think the legal community can work on removing stigma and being more aware of the scientific understanding of what it means to have neurodivergence, how that shows up. We really only hear about it as people acting out in class when they're kids and being late with their assignments. So just recognizing the many different ways that neurodivergence shows up in people's life experience would help people understand why, for example, there's a lot of self-medication through alcohol. I think we're starting to do better around substance abuse support for the legal community. But I think creating more awareness and helping

neurotypical people understand some of the many ways in which neurodivergence impacts us would be helpful.

Is there anything else that you would like people to know?

I think one thing that has helped me to move from surviving to thriving is recognizing that I'm not alone in this community. It can feel extremely lonely for a long time, and like it's a personal failing to have this wiring, but this is a lifetime diagnosis. Learning how to dance with ADHD or other neurodivergence rather than fighting it is where real change can happen, and part of that is having community. Even though it feels scary at first to open up about neurodiversity, I've found that it leads to better understanding, and frankly, reduces my own self-judgment which feels so freeing. I would encourage anyone who's wondering about how to look at this to embrace it. That really, the only way out is through. Continuing to either numb or try to outrun your neural wiring is not healthy. It's not going to lead to great outcomes. Recognizing that really does decrease suffering—I know that from my own experience. I definitely do not judge people for having a hard time figuring out this path. Everyone deserves support.

We are very grateful to these individuals for their willingness to engage in conversations with us and with the community, and for offering us a window into some of the strengths and challenges of our neurodivergent colleagues in the law. ●

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