



In late 2021, toward the end of year 11, I was officially diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Growing up, I often felt different. I am sensitive to certain flavours, smells, textures, and sounds and was often accused of being fussy. I struggled to interpret humour and sarcasm and often misunderstood facial expressions and social cues. Making social connections with my peers was always challenging. In school, asking for help from teachers felt impossible, because I was constantly afraid of being ridiculed for asking a “stupid question.” Because I was an academic student, many of my peers and several of my teachers scoffed at my ASD diagnosis, even accusing me of attention-seeking. But my ASD diagnosis helped me to finally understand myself and appreciate that I was not broken, just different.

Teenagers are often challenged by the question, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” For a long time, I did not know. But during year 12, I knew I wanted to make a difference for other students who struggled to navigate the school system. I wanted to become a teacher. This week, I started my third year of the Bachelor of Secondary Education program at James Cook University in Cairns. I want to become an advocate and a change-maker among my teaching peers, highlighting the potential and the difficulties all young people face in education. I especially want to be an advocate for neurodiverse students.

From personal experience, I know the profound and transformational power one special teacher can have on the lives of their students. My experience reinforced the critical need for more committed educators, particularly in regional Far North Queensland. It has strengthened my resolve to contribute positively to the region's educational landscape. My greatest desire is to become “that teacher” for other students who struggle to fit into the education system.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to the Far North Queensland Youth Assistance Fund for their encouragement and support of my university journey. I am truly honored to be the recipient of the Thelma & Michael Bryan Memorial Fund. Thelma Bryan's legacy as an educator, having dedicated her career to teaching students across three continents, is an inspiration for myself and all future educators. Her passion for education and for bettering society resonates deeply with my own aspirations, and this scholarship will empower me to continue striving for success – for myself and my future students.

Thank you for believing in me.

Caleb Maas

