



Press Release

Immediate Release

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### **Service User at Cygnet Elms Shares Personal Story for World Autism Acceptance Month**

To mark World Autism Acceptance Month, a service user at Cygnet Elms has shared her personal experiences of living with autism, offering an honest reflection on diagnosis, identity, and the realities of day-to-day life.

Reflecting on her early experiences, Vikki said: "I knew that I was very different to other people and that other people were experiencing different things to me. I could see that other people would be able to do things easily, that I found really hard – like going to the shop, going outside or processing school."

She explained that she was initially diagnosed with ADHD, as those symptoms were more apparent at first. However, after receiving medication, it became clear that her autistic needs were not being addressed. She said: "It was especially evident that I struggled with sensory sensitivities especially noise sensitivity and the struggles with regulating myself."

Receiving an autism diagnosis brought complex emotions. She said: "For a long time, I was ashamed of my diagnoses. All of them. I didn't want to be different from others and I was so desperate to fit in and be 'normal', not realising that normal doesn't exist. I felt as though the diagnosis of Autism would mean that I was less than other people and wouldn't be valued or able to find or maintain jobs and friendships and access day to day life."

She spoke positively about the support she has received at Cygnet Elms, describing it as a place that understands her needs. She said: "Being a specialist hospital for people with learning disabilities and autism, Elms really understand my needs, right from their very roots. Elms strive to provide me with all the support I need to reach my full potential. Life isn't easy, but Elms help me to navigate my way through the difficult times, and the day to day difficulties that I have. They help me to see a bit of hope, no matter how dim it seems."

Her perspective on autism has evolved over time, particularly through support from organisations including Elms and Open Theatre Company. She said: "With companies like Elms, and Open Theatre Company, my opinion of my Autism has changed. I am now proud to be autistic and I champion autism- even to the point of studying it at PhD level!"

However, she highlighted that misconceptions and assumptions remain a significant challenge. She explained: "People assume that because you are autistic you can't do things. Or the opposite- people assume that because I am academically advanced (studying a PhD) that I can do things that I actually find really challenging – like practical things such as crossing a road, cooking, cleaning, or even processing information."

Describing how autism affects her daily life, she shared both the challenges and strengths it brings. She said: "One of the greatest things about living with autism is that I can use it to inspire others. Autism can be really disabling for me – such as struggling with crossing roads due to the sensations of the wind, that child screaming, that motorbike revving, that siren, the speed of the car, and the need to catch a bus – all which overwhelm me to the point that I forget the basics of how to be safe. However, being autistic is also my superpower as it provides me with a wealth of creativity that I can use to help me problem solve and share my life stories with other people in a creative way."

She also addressed ongoing misconceptions about autism. She said: "There are still a lot of common misconceptions. One of the worst ones is that "everyone is a bit autistic", and another worst one is "high functioning / low functioning" labels. These common misconceptions do not help the autistic community as it is now acknowledged that "once you know one person with autism, you know that one person with autism" meaning that you cannot assume things about a person due to their diagnosis as we are all different and our experiences are different. Another is "lack of empathy", whereas in fact, it is argued that we have double-empathy and feel emotions even more strongly than non-autistic people (neurotypical)."

She described the challenges of autism, including sensory sensitivities and communication differences, as well as the benefits. She said: "The challenges of autism definitely include the struggles with sensory sensitivity, and for me, the need to have physical contact with other people in order to fully engage with them and express how I feel about them. This can also be the other way around for some people who don't like touch at all. Also, the notion of being forced to make eye-contact in order to show that you are listening whereas I am more likely to be listening and understanding if I am not making eye-contact."

She added: "However, through drama, I have found ways of making it look like I am making eye contact when I am looking at a person's forehead or bridge of their nose. Although this is sometimes tricky if they have a mark on their face or something distracting!"

Highlighting the positives, she said: "The benefits of autism is certainly the creativity and potential to inspire other people. And hyperfocus! Once I am engaged in something I really enjoy, I will do it for hours! Days! Weeks! Months! But hyperfocus can also cause a few problems as I get obsessive in my special interests – like rainbows, autism and theatre; and want to talk about them all the time."

She concluded with a powerful message about the dual nature of autism. She said: "Autism is both disabling and a superpower. It is not one or the other. It is both. I really struggle with some aspects of life due to being autistic, but I wouldn't be doing my PhD if I wasn't autistic- as I wouldn't have the patience and determination and

special interest in it – giving me the hyperfocus I need to complete such a high level degree!"

Cygnets Elms, on Streetly Road, Birmingham, is part of the Cygnets Health Care division and is a 10-bed care service for women with learning disabilities and autism.