

In the years since, Lehmann's speaking engagements have taken him all over the United States, and even as far away as London. He speaks at outreach seminars, medical lectures and government functions about the realities of living with autism and advocating for more legal and societal inclusivity. Lehmann also now serves as a board member of both the Autism Society of America and Autism Coalition of Nevada, and as the Youth Ambassador for the City of Reno under Mayor Hillary Schieve.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd be doing what I'm doing," Lehmann said. "I thought I'd be that guy, 35-years-old, living in his mom's basement and never having a job of his own. And I was that guy until I was 24: On disability, no friends, no girlfriend, no job. I'm 28 now, so that was just four years ago. I don't know. Again, that's one of the—I want to say 'ironic,' but it's not because I always knew within me, from the get-go, that I had something to give to this world."

Next chapter

On April 9, Lehmann released his new book *On the Outside Looking In: My Life on the Autism Spectrum*, as an expansion of his experiences and lessons he's learned in the seven years since his last book. *On the Outside* also contains 82 poems, some of which are reprinted from his first book.

"I guess 'raw and transparent' is the way I'd put it," Lehmann said. "It's just me writing a poem, and I'm distraught or angry or depressed or anxious and it's just totally 100 percent me. ... There are some poems in there that made me think twice about publishing them. I was like, 'Russell, do you really want these out there for people to read?'"

Being authentic about his experiences, he said, serves his long-term goal of generalizing his message. While his diagnosis is part of who he is, Lehmann believes his message is valuable to everyone—not solely the autistic community—and he rejects being labeled simply: "a motivational speaker with autism."

"One of the main tenets of my messages to everybody is to be themselves," Lehmann said. "I wasn't really part of society for a large portion of my life, and that's why I wasn't societally conditioned to wear a mask. In society, we mask our feelings. We go to work, put on a happy face even though we're struggling on the inside, and, you know, our fingers are crossed that maybe someone will notice that we're wearing that mask and take it off for us. I don't think that should be necessary."



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RUSSELL LEHMANN

For now, however, Lehmann's advocacy is still important, as misconceptions about what autism is or the medical explanations behind it can lead to insensitive, and sometimes dangerous, responses. One that Lehmann touches on briefly in his book is autism's current erroneous association with vaccination.

"If it wasn't so serious, I would almost be laughing," Lehmann said of parents who choose not to vaccinate their children because of the "risk" of "catching autism." "They'd rather risk their kids' lives than have them turn out like me, and I think that's pretty amazing. That's hard to digest."

The supposed "link" between vaccinations and autism has been scientifically debunked many times, but to Lehmann, continuing to get onstage and share his story goes beyond just correcting a single erroneous belief. Lehmann's goal is to destigmatize the condition he was born with, one that still takes a toll on his daily interactions with his friends, family and the audiences he meets. To Lehmann, though, it's all part of what he was meant to do.

"I think, when I look at the totality of my thoughts and experiences, that has been the recipe for my wisdom," Lehmann said. "I like to talk about everything, the good, the bad, the positive and negative. [I want to] paint that broad picture of human experience, and that, if we embrace our struggles and run towards them and not away from them—just like when we're tested in school. When we're tested in life, it shows us what we can improve on, what we can do better and what we're already capable of doing. ... I've learned that, when I face hardships, instead of thinking, 'why me?' I think, 'why not me?'" □

Readers can learn more about *On the Inside Looking In* and Lehmann's speaking schedule at www.russell-lehmann.com

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