

Autism Awareness at the UN:

Special Children's League Whittier member Darlene Hanson shares her recent experiences at the UN and issues a call for inclusion through technology



I am Darlene Hanson and am just finishing my two-year term as co-vice president of Ways and Means for the Special Children's League of Whittier. SCL-W has been

a part of my life for over 30 years. Nine years ago, I became a member! I am a speech pathologist who started my career in the public schools working with kids with the most significant needs. In my work, I spend much of my time thinking about technology and communication, and the access to everyday things.

April 2nd was World Autism Awareness Day at the United Nations. This year the topic at the UN was Assistive Technology. I was asked by the committee to join a panel and discuss the importance and needs of individuals who use assistive technology, in regards to the need for access and training.

My presentation focused on how our way of understanding how autism affects a person's life is changing. We have long believed that autism is a "behavioral disorder"; new research and work is expanding our understanding to include 'neurological differences'. These differences are often in the area of movement. When a person's ability to move their body, thoughts and emotions is impacted, it can affect how they access the use of technology.

For people with autism, technology has been a great resource, providing opportunities to engage with others in a way that is easier for them. However, because of the complex neurological differences and the effect on communication, many children and adults still need training and support to engage with others when using the technology.

I do hope that my participation in this panel was able to spark an interest in others to learn more about how the "whole person" is impacted by autism, and to remember that participation in one's life and communication are basic human rights. If we are not supporting individuals to learn to communicate and participate in their lives, then we are deciding who gets to be a part of this community.

I would like to leave you with an example of the power-of-communication. This week I met with a young woman, 22 years old. She had been working with a professional for 7 years in the late 90's and in 2008 that service stopped.

When this service ended, her life became that of only using preprogrammed systems, which she does well. However, she's only been able to talk about what her staff have thought she would want to say, and her system is simple, if compared to my own life.



This week we met. She was able to use her preprogrammed system, and the keyboard. Using the keyboard allowed her to say what she wanted. As she was leaving, she grabbed my arm and her iPad - she wanted to say more. She typed, "please help me to communicate better I don't ever want to be silent again." This is why I do what I do, and this is why our work with the Special Children's League is so important. Please continue your good work and continue to learn more about those we support.