



Lessons from a Champion Mother About Autism

By Valerie A. Jackson, Esq.

"As an ardent DEI champion, I've learned now more than ever the true meaning of advocacy... and how to apply my expertise in strategy, communication, and leadership to advocate for my son and ensure he receives the support and opportunities he deserves."

I recently came across the above words in a LinkedIn post, authored by my sorority sister, Shanique Bonelli-Moore, Chief Diversity & Social Impact Officer at the Clorox Company. For a decade she has been a corporate diversity and inclusion thought leader and a savvy communications expert. I've always admired her passion for amplifying voices and her unyielding commitment to making space for others. Her advocacy this time, was not for the many. Instead, it was for a far more personal cause—speaking as a champion on behalf of her son.

Her post invited us into her journey navigating autism—two years to be exact, since she and her husband learned her son was on the autism spectrum. In customary style, she was raising necessary awareness as she reflected on the challenges and triumphs of navigating autism. She shared that "[e]ach day brings its

own set of hurdles, but also moments of triumph. From advocating for inclusive education to fostering understanding in the workplace, I've been committed to breaking down barriers and creating a more accepting world for my son and others like him who learn differently."

Her words were a wonderful reminder of what it means to be a diversity champion—fearlessly advocating for the collective well-being and diversity of community with the recognition that every individual, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities, has unique gifts, talents and perspectives that contribute to the richness of our society.

To be inclusive means—inclusive of everyone. Disability inclusion, in particular, is about creating environments that are accessible and welcoming to all. It's about dismantling barriers, obstacles and attitudes that exclude; and collectively working to foster environments where everyone has the opportunity to participate fully in all aspects of life. Expanding our awareness of, and advocating for the *differently abled*, allows us to open doors to new perspectives, innovations, and solutions that only a diverse population can provide. When we do, we help to build a world that is more compassionate, more understanding, and better equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

We are each an essential piece of the collective community. Like a tapestry woven from threads of different strengths, colors, and textures--our individual differences are the essence of our collective identity. When we acknowledge and appreciate each person's uniqueness—in whatever capacity we may be abled—we affirm the value of every member of society.

In her words, *"my son has taught me more than I could have ever imagined about patience, empathy, and unconditional love. He has reinforced my belief that differences are what make us beautiful, and that with the right support and mindset, anything is possible."*

Amen to that.