

Using Technology to Tell the Story of Autism

Interview with **JODI MURPHY**, Founder of Geek Club Books, on how the organization uses technology and the art of storytelling to raise awareness about autism.

Q: What inspired you to create this initiative?

One in 68 children are diagnosed with autism, and the public’s understanding of autism is shrouded in mystery and misperception, leaving the autistic vulnerable to bullying and social isolation. 70% of autistic children report being bullied in schools. If we do not change this, these children will grow up to become even more isolated and financially dependent as adults. Today, 85% of autistic adults are unemployed or underemployed.

To me, these aren’t just statistics

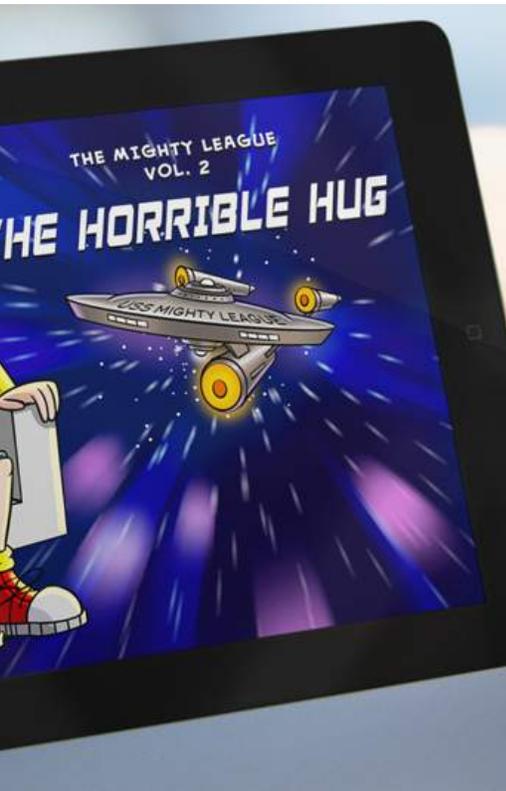
but real individuals with families who just want their children to have the same opportunities to live meaningful, productive lives. I founded Geek Club Books, a 501c3 nonprofit, to bring forth positive views of autism focusing on ‘abilities’ rather than disabilities and highlighting similarities over ‘differences’ for better understanding and connection. At our core, our mission is autism awareness, education for the public, and empowerment programs for autistic individuals through their own creative self-expression.

We accomplish this through

technology and the art of storytelling.

Q: How does technology play a role in your daily work?

We use technology to be compelling and relevant, and to draw the attention of the general public. We want to capture the hearts and minds of those outside the autism community and move them past ‘awareness’ into a deeper understanding and human connection to those on the autism spectrum. When we can create a compassionate environment, we can affect change. For example, we use app technology to create interactive children’s stories and curriculum that entertains while educating about autism. We’re also building a digital publishing platform for autistic writers. Again, their stories connect us in ways we can all relate to on a human level—the struggles, the



triumphs, the joys, and the dreams.

Q ■ What are some of the key tools that Geek Club Books uses to communicate with its audience?

There are so many! Let me share my top five:

- 1) **Blackfish Children's Books** – Our apps are developed on this proprietary platform that allows simultaneous development for iOS devices, Kindle Fire, Android, PC, and Mac.
- 2) **Post Planner for Facebook** – Our target audience is primarily on Facebook. Post Planner helps us find great content to share in addition to our own.
- 3) **Yoast for SEO** – We publish original content on our website twice a week but no one will see it if we don't optimize our site for the search engines. Yoast has an SEO WordPress plugin that's free and it makes sure you've added searchable keywords in all your pages and posts.

4) **SumoMe List Builder** – Building an engaged community mailing list is critical for a nonprofit. SumoMe is a free and easy way to add sign up forms that will integrate with your email service provider.

5) **LeadPages™** – LeadPages is a mobile responsive landing page generator with templates you can customize. It's helped us increase our conversion rates significantly.

Q ■ Can you tell us more about your app? How was that received?

Our first autism story app, **The Mighty League, Vol. 1: The Terrible Taunting**, was released in September 2013. It was in the top 25 downloads of all apps in iTunes on World Autism Day. It was selected by Toys"R"Us to be one of the featured apps in their Tabeo Tablet, and we received a Temple Grandin Award for its positive contribution to the autism community.

Q ■ For nonprofits that are starting to do more storytelling, can you share some lessons learned?

In today's environment, it's more important than ever to let your audience get to know your nonprofit on a personal level. Did you know that over 27,000 nonprofits in over 68 countries participated in #GivingTuesday on December 2, 2014? I personally received over a dozen emails from charities my husband and I have supported over the years asking for a donation on that day. It's indicative of just how many of us are out there with worthy causes.

Whom do you choose? You pick those in which you feel a strong emotional connection. So tell the stories about the board members, the staff, and the people you serve.

Let people see 'behind the curtain' of your organization, your struggles, and successes...and they'll care enough to contribute.

Q ■ Looking ahead, what does success and impact look like for your organization?

We are a very new nonprofit and 2015 will be a year of growth and expansion. We are working on the second app in the Mighty League Series: **Mighty League, Vol. 2: The Horrible Hug**, funded through an Indiegogo campaign. Three autistic adults are contributing their talents to make it happen, and they are getting paid for it! We are working with curriculum partners to make our Common Core curriculum to accompany the apps more robust and, hopefully, launching a pilot program in elementary schools in the fall. Success for us is defined by producing stories through technology to change views about autism and putting autistic individuals to work to help us achieve that goal. And we'll do it one story at a time...one autistic individual at a time.

Q ■ Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

We believe in the power of collaboration and mutual support. If there are any nonprofits whose membership can benefit from our apps, please reach out. We are always interested in ways we can cross-promote our campaigns. We can be reached through our website at (geekclubbooks.com).



JODI MURPHY is the founder of **Geek Club Books** (geekclubbooks.com), a 501c3 autism charity affecting change through storytelling and technology. She is also co-founder of **Zoom Autism Magazine**, an uplifting and informative digital lifestyle magazine for the autism community.