



Connected Possibilities

Supporting Neurodiversity Celebration Week

Written by Keith Mckenzie

Beyond Barriers: The Power of Connection & possibilities in a Neurodivergent Journey

Living as a neurodivergent person can bring many challenges. Despite facing barriers (often due to a lack of understanding and validation) I have never waited for positive change to happen on its own. Instead, I have remained committed to building my own sense of purpose.

Although there have been times when I have not been believed or taken seriously, I have never defined myself by the difficulties I live with or by how others may misperceive me. Because of this mindset, it has led to many projects, developments and opportunities over the years.

For more than 25 years, I have developed a wide range of awareness projects and activities (face-to-face, online and within communities). Along the way, I have also been fortunate to receive encouragement from a great friend Bernadate Adams and many people who inspired me to push my ambitions further.

Obstacles still exist, but they have encouraged me to think strategically and build connections across different communities and parts of society. By combining awareness, insight and creativity, these connections have opened doors to meaningful opportunities.

Through these experiences, I have been able to contribute to areas such as crime prevention, transport accessibility, safer travel and disability hate crime awareness.



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Background

Before I was diagnosed as neurodivergent on the autistic spectrum, I faced several barriers to accessing further and higher education in art and design for many years. I had to take simple but strategic risks in order to pursue my ambitions. This eventually enabled me to access further and higher education in graphic design at locations more than 20 miles away, including Herefordshire, which ultimately led to graduating in Northampton.

Many decades later, after being diagnosed on the autistic spectrum, barriers still remain. So-called disability support programmes can sometimes mislead or interfere by attempting to downgrade career aspirations rather than support them.

As a result, this led to the development of our family of awareness projects, activities and campaigns for over 25 years, with creativity at the heart of the initiative. Now, in an era of multi-skilled expectations and artificial intelligence, I have adapted my strategy to connect with different communities where creativity plays an important role.



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Opportunities Through Connection



Album Cover: The DiaPeace - Diamond D.

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Photographed and designed by Pritt Kalsi. Modelled by Keith Mckenzie

Building connections has led to a number of unique and diverse opportunities across creative, community and awareness spaces.

In the creative field, I had the opportunity to participate in the music-related project King of the Beats, developed by my friend Pritt Kalsi. This involved behind-the-scenes participation and filming alongside music producers and artists in the Midlands, London and other locations.

I was also featured on the cover of a hip-hop music album by a legendary artist and producer. The album cover design itself was created by Pritt Kalsi and was the winning entry in an international design competition.



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Opportunities Through Connection



Extracts from the Embrace dancing inclusive guides for social templates and as video reels in conjunction with Birmingham based Latinmotion

Through my involvement in housing initiatives, I was invited to participate in a national security conference, which enabled the voices and experiences of housing residents to be represented at a national level.

Another important part of my journey has been through dancing. I became a regular participant in dance activities in the local community, contributing as a dance class assistant and teacher. I have also been involved behind the scenes at two major Latin dance conventions in Birmingham. In some cases this has included volunteering, supporting event organisation and contributing ideas to help strengthen volunteer engagement and interpersonal standards.

In addition, I collaborated with the Birmingham-based organisation Latinmotion to develop a series of inclusivity guides shared through video and social media as part of the awareness initiative Embrace Dancing.



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Opportunities Through Connection



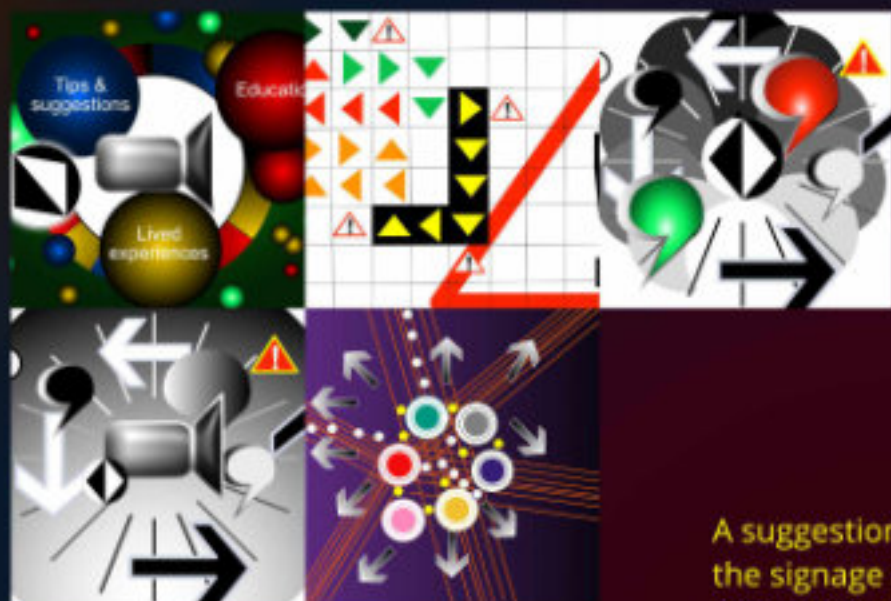
Being filmed for the "Be Bold Birmingham" campaign

The video was produced by Liquid in conjunction with Birmingham City Council

In 2022 when Birmingham hosted the Commonwealth Games, I had the honour of participating in a video campaign highlighting Birmingham's legacy beyond the Games and celebrating the city's community spirit.

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Supporting Safer and More Accessible Transport



A suggestion document developed for the signage and passenger information team at Transport for West Midlands

Another area of involvement has been transport accessibility and safer travel. With the support of Transport for West Midlands, West Midlands Safer Transport Partnership and National Neurodiversity Training, I have participated in a number of research projects and engagement programmes aimed at improving understanding of the experiences and challenges neurodivergent people face when using public transport.

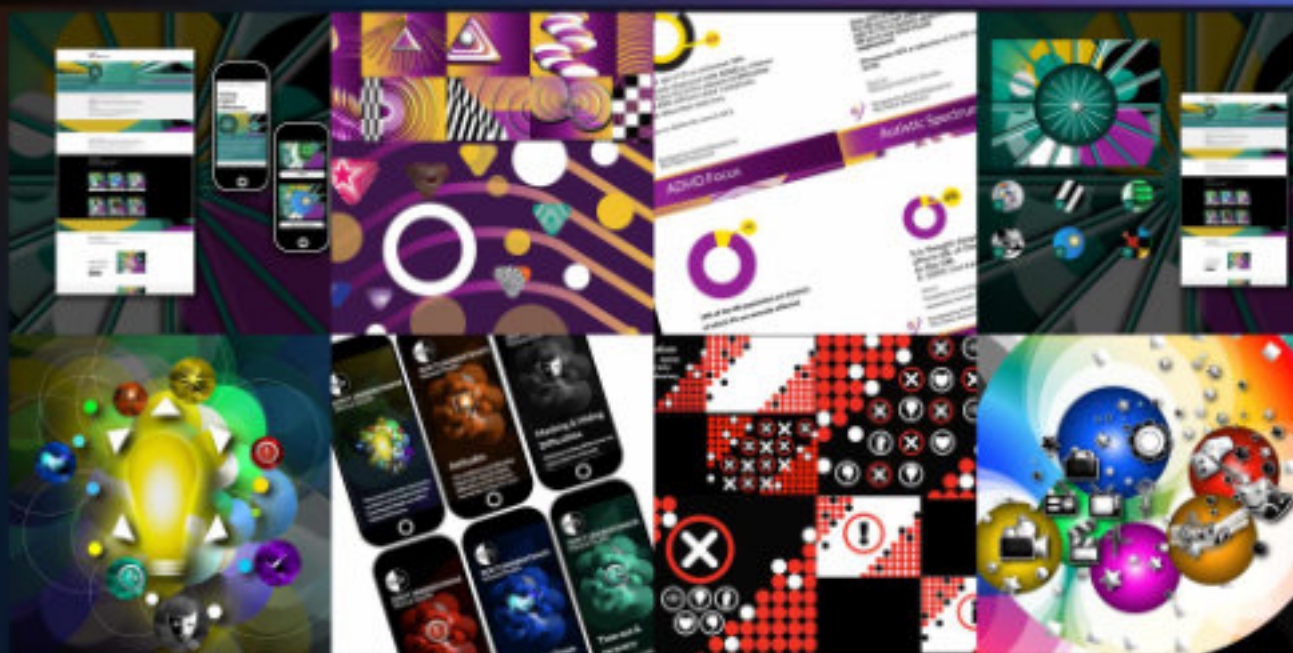
This work has also included addressing barriers linked to safer travel, such as antisocial behaviour and situations where neurodivergent behaviour may be misunderstood by members of the public or by people working within transport environments. I also has an opportunity to meet the team behind the signage and passenger information to provide a suggestions confidence and will hopefully improve passenger confidence

Through a disability support charity, I also participated in a research group addressing disability hate crime and the challenges disabled people face within communities.



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Awareness and Community Engagement



Alongside these activities, awareness and advocacy have remained central to my work.

I have participated in conferences and events focused on education and disability empowerment, including events held at the NEC and in Somerset. More recently, I was invited twice to contribute as a panel participant at an awareness event hosted by the University of Birmingham. Through my awareness initiatives (Plus Value Awareness and Expressive Awareness*) I have developed a wide range of projects, information resources, visual artwork and insight articles that explore the realities of neurodivergent life.

Note:* - Expressive Awareness is the forthcoming brand that will replace Differences Originals linked with specialist awareness projects along with the legacy projects since 2000



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Awareness and Community Engagement



Examples of insight and analysis document covering different topics and suggestions including reforming the welfare system, neurodiversity since the pandemic, inclusive dancing and representation of disabilities and difficulties in politics, press & media

These initiatives also include analytical and reflective documents exploring topics such as:

- how society has changed since the global pandemic
- representation of disability and difficulty within politics
- the role of public authorities, the press and media in shaping perceptions of disability

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Creative and Innovative Developments



Creativity has played an important role in many of my activities. Through my involvement in dance classes and community events, I have regularly supported marketing and promotion through posters, printed flyers, outdoor materials and social media.

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Creative and Innovative Developments



I have also taken part in creative competitions showcasing Birmingham's legacy since hosting the Commonwealth Games.



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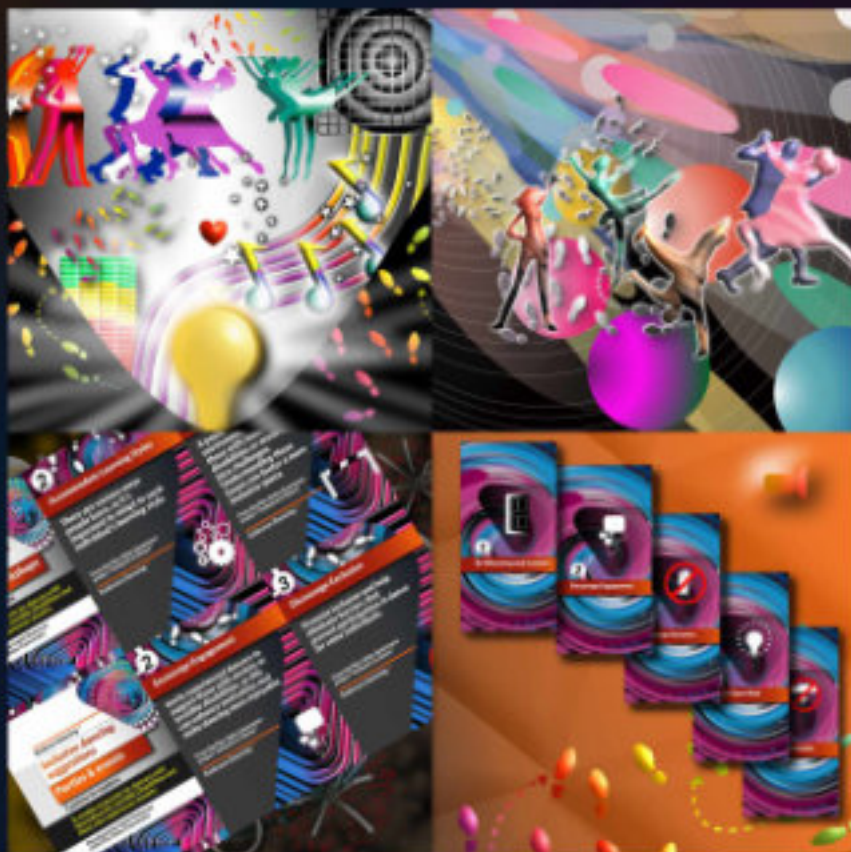
Creative and Innovative Developments



Through my participation in dance conventions, I have developed several practical ideas designed to support volunteers and improve engagement. These include interactive digital touchpoints for volunteers using tablet devices, as well as pocket-sized guidance tools designed to support consistent interpersonal standards among volunteers using mobile devices.

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Dancing and Awareness



Dance has also become an important platform for awareness. Through my involvement in the dance community, I created the awareness concept Embrace Dancing. This initiative includes guidance, projects and awareness materials designed to promote inclusivity within dance environments. Each year, themed awareness features are also developed to mark events such as International Dance Day and Autism Dance Day in April, helping to celebrate creativity while encouraging greater understanding and inclusion.

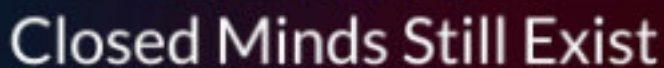


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Recognition



Through my education with Google, I was nominated for a mental health award in recognition of my awareness website and its contribution to supporting neurodivergent individuals and members of staff.



The Main Point

14/14