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# Rethinking autism

**RASHELLE PREDOVNIK**

FAMILIES and educators are being invited to rethink autism and consider the latest research and initiatives presented during a two-day seminar to normalise and celebrate the diversity of the human condition.

Interstate and local speakers will present a range of informative and thought-provoking sessions at the Autism West Annual Symposium on November 4 and 5.

International speaker Chris Ulmer said he be-

gan his career as a special educator and soon observed a disconnect between his pupils and society.

He noticed the intelligence and humour displayed by his students was not typically appreciated by those without special needs experience.

So the teacher from the United States created Special Books by Special Kids (SBSK) a multi-media non-profit that is now spearheading a worldwide acceptance movement.

Mr Ulman said the movement exchanges stories and gives children and families from the special needs community an audience to share their thoughts and experiences.

The initiative also connects societies around the world and builds a global dialogue around neurodiversity.

Mr Ulman said SBSK was also an educational resource that inspired teachers through innovative and intentional curriculums.

The symposium brings SBSK to Australia for the very first time and Mr Ulmer said he was looking for people to share their stories.

Already more than 250 people with a range of neurodiversity conditions – including autism – have been interviewed, but this is the first time Australian voices have had the opportunity to contribute.

Participants can share anything they want and filming will take place on November 4 and 5, during the Rethinking Autism symposium.

Clinical psychologist Darin Cairns, who set up award-winning early intervention services in Western Australia for children with autism and related conditions, and Professor Andrew Whitehouse who has published over 100 peer-reviewed journals will share their insights at the symposium.

Dr Emma Goodall will discuss her research project on how adults with autism can increase their self-awareness to better self-manage their anxiety.

The South Australian-based autism consultant, teacher, blogger and published author combines her lived experience of Aspergers to help people understand what it means to be on the autistic spectrum.

And how different life is for those on and not on the spectrum.

Through her research Dr Goodall found a teacher's effectiveness was seriously limited by a lack of understanding of the autism spectrum, and a lack of awareness

of the potential of these students.

So she published a book to help address the issues raised in her PhD findings which is now used extensively as a resource for teachers and families.

Autism West chief executive officer Alison Davies said a wide number of registrations had come in, including from Ellenbrook and Jane Brook for the symposium.

A desire to support local families dealing with autism motivated Forrestfield and High Wycombe Community Bank Branches to put on a Black Tie Soiree and the annual fundraising dinner raised \$100,000 during a three-year period.

Forrestfield and High Wycombe chairperson Colleen Bitmead said the reason the event was put on was to raise awareness and educate people in the community about autism.

She said this need was initially raised with the bank during a community forum and the

funds raised helped the Autism Association of WA to open a respite centre in Midland for children to attend as far away as Northam and York.

Rise Network chief executive officer Justine Colyer welcomed the symposium's key theme: to celebrate diversity.

She said even at the highest level, research showed ASX-listed companies that had diversity on their boards performed better.

"The more diverse you are – and that diversity can include

age, gender, disability or culture – the better decisions you make because you're hearing more different points of view," she said.

"There is a huge proportion of people in our community with a disability and mental health issues and if you can't engage and celebrate that diversity you are out of touch with half the population."

The symposium will be held at the Esplanade Hotel in Fremantle.

To make a booking or for more information go to: <http://tinyurl.com/h2gu46g>

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