

'The stigma contaminates the workplace': Perth man's personal mission to help others with autism

By [Marta Pascual Juanola](#)

August 19, 2020 – 6.04am



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Tom Oliver is any manager's dream employee: extremely polite, always on time, has a gift for routine, and he can focus on a task for six hours straight without even flinching.

But the 19-year-old Fremantle student has experienced more discrimination in the workplace than most. It usually comes as soon as he discloses his autism diagnosis and often ends up with him being demoted on the spot.



Tom Oliver, 19, is a biomedical science and law student at the University of Notre Dame.
MARTA PASCUAL JUANOLA

"I was working as a kitchen hand taking orders. I told them I had autism and they must have done a Google search and said, 'this guy doesn't have the social skills', even though I was doing the job perfectly for a month at that point," he said.

"The stigma just tends to contaminate the workplace, it tends to find its way into every facet of life, and for autistic people, it's very difficult to get a job in the first place."

Now, Mr Oliver wants to use the diagnosis to his advantage in his quest to protect other people with autism.

A second-year law and biomedical science student at the University of Notre Dame, the teenager plans to become a criminal lawyer and specialise in defending autistic clients.

He said traits such as sensory issues and the inability to read social cues often meant situations that could be easily resolved ended up escalating, leaving vulnerable people on the autism spectrum to face serious charges and lengthy jail sentences.

"I just think it's categorically wrong and it just needs to be changed. I do feel a sense of obligation to protect people with autism who are under the wrath of the criminal justice system," he said.

Mr Oliver, who plans to eventually become a judge to better protect vulnerable West Australians, said more often than not matters could be resolved with a fine and suitable therapy.

Determined to follow his passion, Mr Oliver is currently working as a law clerk at the City of Fremantle and the Albert Wolff Chambers, shadowing barrister Simon Watters in WA's Supreme Court.

"I quite like the traits, to be honest with you. I think it's pretty cool."

Tom Oliver

Mr Oliver also works as a tennis instructor in his own coaching business and as a consultant for several organisations including Autism West.

He hopes his experience will change people's perceptions of what autism looks like and convince employers workers with autism can be invaluable assets.

"It is decidedly incorrect to meet someone with autism who may have very poor social skills or who may be nonverbal, and extrapolate this, by incorrectly and unqualifiedly assuming that all people with autism are as such," he said.

"I wish people knew that we are really trying to fit into society. It's taking the meaning of 'faking until you make it' to a whole new level.





Mr Oliver would like to become a judge. MARTA PASCUAL JUANOLA

"People use the word 'autistic' colloquially in everyday life as an insult, and it's not helping the stigma. But the worst thing is commenting on autistic people's social skills, it's just really insulting especially when they are really trying with great difficulty to conform and adapt."

He was ultimately proud of what autism had allowed him to achieve.

"I quite like the traits, to be honest with you. I think it's pretty cool," Mr Oliver said.

"I tend to love just focusing on the law and studying, just researching.

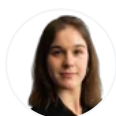
"I just lose track of everything, I am just in my world. There's no ambiguity of having to worry about saying the right or wrong thing in a social context. I just know that what I am doing is correct. It's hard to articulate with words, it just feels perfect, where I'm meant to be."

Tom Oliver was one of several West Australians to participate in a report by the Commissioner for Children and Young People on how to better support and understand autistic youth in WA, which was presented to the Australian Senate Select Committee on Autism.

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Marta is an award-winning photographer and journalist with a focus on social justice issues and local government.