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## SMC Jan Term Speaker Series Focuses on Lives Well-Lived

By A. K. Carroll



Jesse Saperstein Photo provided

"There's nothing wrong with being really different," said Jesse Saperstein, motivational speaker and best-selling author of the book "Atypical: Life with Asperger's in 20 1/3 Chapters."

"Everyone has something to offer," he said.

An advocate for autism and anti-bullying campaigns, Saperstein will be speaking at Saint Mary's College as a part the school's Jan Term speaker series, "Lives Well Lived." The Lamorinda community is invited to take part in over half a dozen lectures on topics ranging from the place of minority voices to the hard work of forgiveness.

Saperstein will be speaking at 1 p.m. today in Hagerty Lounge. He will be stopping at Saint Mary's halfway through his Bay Area tour for his latest book, "Getting a Life with Asperger's." He is being brought in with support from Jan Term and the Catholic Institute of Lasallian Social Action (CILSA). The idea of contacting Saperstein came from Michelle Barker, who serves as the administrative coordinator for CILSA and has a daughter with Asperger's.

"In today's world, people with disabilities are included in the marginalized groups within our society who are victims of injustice," said Barker. She was reminded of this when she heard Saperstein speak last September, as his message falls directly in line with Saint Mary's mission of social justice.

Being a public speaker first entered Saperstein's mind during college, when he served

as the residential advisor for the AIDS Awareness House at Hobart and Williams Smith Colleges. During that time Saperstein watched "Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story," a documentary based on the life of Joey DiPaolo, who contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion as a teenager, and went on to become a renowned AIDS activist. Saperstein got in touch with DiPaolo and decided that speaking and activism was just the sort of thing he wanted to do.

Following college, Saperstein set out to accomplish this goal. Sponsored by the DiPaolo AIDS Foundation, he planned to hike all 2,174 miles of the Appalachian Trail. It took him seven months, and in that time he raised \$19,000 for pediatric AIDS. He attributes his dogged persistence to having Asperger's syndrome. "Most people eventually get to that point where they [give up]," Saperstein said. "I never seem to reach that point unless it's an emergency." Frigid temperatures and relentless blizzards were not enough to deter him. "I was able to understand that all I had to do was keep walking."

Saperstein's desire to write books came about after the trail. "I had a difficult time transitioning to reality," he said. "I lost two careers, [which was] devastating." Writing gave a voice to that pain. "That is how I tend to justify what has happened," Saperstein said. "[By saying] this is what I have to write about." Saperstein hopes that his books will help others and keep them from learning too many lessons the hard way.

As an autism and anti-bullying advocate, Saperstein speaks from his own experiences growing up and living in a world that doesn't always embrace his differences. "I've been bullied a lot in my life, [even] throughout adulthood," he said, noting that people still misinterpret his actions and motives, calling him a "stalker" when he relentlessly pursued finding the owner of a lost debit card. "[There's] a big myth that it gets better someday. For me, it did not get better for a very long time."

One of Saperstein's core beliefs is that all challenges can be overcome through tenacious work. "I've made my weakness a strength," he said of living with Asperger's. "A lot of people can do that if they want it enough. Individuals with Asperger's have ideas and talents that can help others. We're not as uncommon or dissimilar as we sometimes think we are."

To learn more about Jesse Saperstein and his journey through a life well lived, visit [www.jessesaperstein.com](http://www.jessesaperstein.com).

Upcoming Jan Term Speakers at SMC

Alan and Karen Jabbour

"Life Changing Encounters with Appalachian Culture"

Jan. 20, 7 p.m., Soda Center

Matthew Boger, Tim Zaal and Jason Cohen

"Facing Fear: A Path to Forgiveness"

Jan. 21, 1 p.m., Hagerty Lounge

Tobias Buckell

"The Future You Don't See"

Jan. 26, 7 p.m., Soda Center

Theresa Sparks

"The Emerging TGNC (Trans-Gender-Non-Conforming) Community: Challenges and Opportunities"

Jan. 28, 1 p.m., Hagerty Lounge

For more details on the Saint Mary's Jan Term lectures, screenings and performances (all of which are free and open to the public), visit: <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/january-term/jan-term-2015-speaker-series>.

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