



Dancing through neurodiversity

PHOTO COURTESY OF MILNER
DESIGN BY ERIN MARTIN

Elon freshman aims to encourage accessibility for people with autism in dance

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Elon freshman Maddie Milner wasn't diagnosed with autism until May 2021 at age 16, when transitioning from private to public school proved difficult for her. But before her sophomore year of high school — during the COVID-19 lockdowns — Milner said she suspected she may be neurodivergent.

"We were all inside," Milner said. "There's nothing better to do than just think about what's wrong with you, I guess."

Milner said she was told as a child she wasn't autistic; she was just "quirky." Yet she was in therapy for all of elementary school to help her with social skills and texture sensitivities.

In between therapy and school, she was a dancer.

Milner started dancing when she was three and stayed in the same dance studio until she graduated high school. Milner said dance serves two purposes for her, one of which is to stim freely.

According to the Children's

Hospital of Philadelphia Research Institute, stimming is repeated body movements or repeated movement of objects. Some examples of stimming include flapping hands or twirling a lock of hair. According to the CHPRI, it is a very common practice for autistic people. According to the National Autistic Society, autistic people tend to stim for reasons ranging from regulating emotions to gaining or reducing sensory input.

While Milner said stimming fulfills both physical and emotional needs, dance as a stim leans more toward emotional.

Milner also said she expresses complex emotions through dance, a skill that she finds difficult to do verbally as an autistic person.

"It's not like, 'I want you to portray this sentence or this paragraph,'" Milner said. "It's like, 'I want you to portray the sadness of losing a loved one.'"

While Milner said dance has helped her express herself, her time as a dancer wasn't all good. Toward the end of her tenure at the studio she attended in high school, Milner said she was bullied by other dancers and experienced verbal torment, slight physical harassment and exclusion — a form of bullying Milner labels as "girl bullying."

Milner said it was hard to get the dance teachers to believe her accusations of bullying, so she

focused on not worrying about the girls, blocking them on social media and just dancing.

"I think how I got through it was because I was like, 'Well, I can't leave because I'm trying to get into colleges right now, and I can't just not be dancing for this crucial part of my life,'" Milner said. "So I was like, 'I'm here and I'm stuck here for now.'"

Statistics on autistic people being bullied vary, but Ambitious About Autism — a United Kingdom-based charity which aims to help younger autistic folks — says 75% of autistic people under 25 have experienced bullying. The organization also said autistic people are more prone to bullying because of their struggle to read social cues and situations.

Before Milner was bullied at her dance studio, she said she was bullied at school. Jennifer Milner, Maddie's mother, said Maddie's fourth grade science teacher did not like "gifted kids" and was "resentful of them."

At the time, Maddie was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder and labeled a "gifted kid" but not diagnosed with autism.

"I had to have some conversations with her about the way she treated the kids, my kid especially, and the mean things she would say," Jennifer said. "But when that didn't work, I had to have a conversation with the

gifted teacher who was above her and say, 'This is not okay to treat my daughter like this, it's not okay to talk to my daughter like this,' in a very polite and professional way."

Maddie said Jennifer eventually had to talk to the school superintendent about the issue, and the school still did nothing.

Jennifer said the biggest decision she made to advocate for Maddie was to pull her out of public school after fourth grade. Not only because of the bullying, but also because Jennifer said Maddie was so stressed about school and standardized testing that she developed ulcers — painful sores in the stomach lining.

Maddie was homeschooled for a year before entering a "neurodivergent friendly" private school, according to Jennifer.

While Jennifer would often advocate for Maddie, she said she also taught Maddie how to advocate for herself, whether that was raising her to feel equal to men or preparing her to communicate nonverbally when needed.

"I put together flashcards for autism when she can't speak up, and she had those at school," Jennifer said. "The flashcards say, 'I'm overwhelmed,' 'I can't talk right now,' 'I need to leave and calm down.'"

Maddie said she communicates better in writing, so when Jennifer was helping Maddie transition

to Elon, Maddie chose her accommodations, which include the ability to leave the classroom with no questions asked. Then, Jennifer said once the accommodations were sent to Elon, Maddie wrote emails to all her professors explaining the accommodations and encouraged them to ask questions, if needed.

"She has taken ownership of that," Jennifer said. "And the more she does it, the more I see her stepping into her own power."

Maddie said she hated wearing leotards and tights at her high school dance studio. She also said the studio frequently played loud music and used bright lights, which would trigger her sensory issues and send her into a meltdown.

Now, as a dancer at Elon, she said she has the freedom to wear the clothes that she wants to wear and can wear noise-canceling earplugs to class. Maddie said Elon has been "really great" about accommodations and that her dance teachers are nice.

Maddie said she encourages all dance studios to be more "sensory-friendly," such as lowering the volume of the music, dimming the lights and having a more relaxed dress code.

"I think it is incredibly helpful, not just for autistic people, but just everyone in general," Maddie said. "I feel like it just creates a better space for everyone involved."