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# Quieter Hour – A Friendlier Shopping Experience for People with Autism

Rachel Brachman

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Quieter Hour – A Friendlier Shopping Experience for People with Autism

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
Spring 2019

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## **Abstract**

This thesis centers on autism and the exclusionary effects of it. While there is a wealth of new research on this diagnosis indicating that while there is an entire spectrum of autism, many people are fully functional in society. Many of these people simply have limitations. If these limitations were attended to by society, there would be no need for exclusion of people with these types disabilities. Many of the changes needed to promote an environment of inclusion instead of exclusion are not incredibly difficult to make, yet they have not been made.

While people on the spectrum are excluded from all kinds of activities, the most exclusionary are some of the most basic. Many people with autism reports that they avoid going to stores and into public places because it is too overwhelming. These places are often loud and bright. There is so much going on that it becomes a place filled with more anxiety than anything else for them. Due to this, people with autism avoid many public spaces overall, furthering the exclusion they already face by society.

A remedy to one area of this problem is a Quieter Hour. This is when a grocery store dims their lights, turns off the background music, turns off the checkout sounds and posts signs indicating that it is a Quieter Hour for one hour per week. While these changes may seem small, they make a large difference for someone with autism. This changes the environment from one that is too overwhelming to one that is manageable, maybe even pleasant.

## **Executive Summary**

This thesis will begin by analyzing the literature I found most crucial to guide my course of action. This literature shaped my views of autism, helped me understand the severity of the problem, and fostered a better understanding of what action I could take to make an effort to improve this social issue. The thesis will continue with a detailed explanation of the actions I took to try to implement a Quieter Hour at a Wegmans in Syracuse (my “solution”) and the roadblocks I encountered. It will then explore the strengths and weaknesses of the model of a social enterprise, one of the main reasons I could not bring my action plan to fruition. Lastly, I have outlined a new plan of action to make another attempt at instituting a Quieter Hour in Syracuse. This was created based on my initial research, my first attempt at execution, and my full assessment of these experiences as well as a wealth of additional research. With all of the work done in the creation of this thesis, I feel like that I have been able to create a new plan more likely to bring success from the additional research and experience I have gained.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Imagine what it would be like to never be able to go to the grocery store. This experience often brings a sense of control and independence. It gives one the ability to pick the foods that they will be eating, in a sense giving them control over their body. While most people have this experience on a weekly basis, people with autism often do not get to have it at all.

According to National Autistic Society, 64 percent of people with autism avoid going to stores (Kentish 2017). This is because there is too much going on and the experience can overload their senses. There are people moving around quickly with loud carts. People are speaking loudly to someone they ran into. Shoppers often have little patience while trying to get from aisle to aisle to find exactly what they want. The fluorescent lights are incredibly bright and the sound of the store as a whole can just be too much.

This is often the setting one encounters on an ordinary shopping trip. However, while many may just consider it bothersome, it can become traumatic for someone on the autism spectrum. Their experience going to the grocery store is often very different. “Simple sensory stimuli (e.g., noises, patterns) may reliably evoke intense and aversive reactions. This is common in certain clinical groups (e.g., autism) and varies greatly in the neurotypical population.” (Ward 2018). As stated, aversive reactions are common to people on the autism spectrum and those with other neurological disorders, but the specific reactions vary greatly depending on specific sensitivities. This is commonly referred to as sensory overload. A woman with autism explains of her experience, “the sensory overload caused by bright lights, fluorescent lights, colours, and patterns makes the body react as if being attacked or bombarded, resulting in such physical symptoms as headaches, anxiety, panic attacks or aggression” (Williams 1994).

Common symptoms of sensory overload include “increases in heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, confusion, anxiety, mental distress, and/or erratic behavior” (Venes 2009). While these symptoms can be miserable enough on their own, there is often backlash due to a lack of awareness about autism and knowledge of sensory overload. (Ryan 2010). People will see some of these reactions and not understand why they are happening. People may see some “erratic behavior” and are quick to judge the parents, make comments about their inability to keep their children under control and escalate the situation. This causes even more stress on the caregiver and the person with autism. This furthers the problem and makes avoiding stores and public places seem like a better option than having this stressful experience.

This social problem, the exclusion of people on the autism spectrum from routine daily activities, was the one I selected to work on for my Senior Action Plan as a Citizenship and Civic Engagement major. I was given the ability to pick a social issue and create a plan of action to try to improve it. This social issue hits the crux of “citizenship and civic engagement” as a concept, with the idea behind it being that citizens have a right and a duty to engage with the community and government. This engagement ranges from everyday interactions with individuals to engaging local government organizations to right something that is wrong. Excluding a large group of people from being able to go to public spaces is something that needs social intervention to work towards inclusion and equality. It requires engaging with business owners and helping them understand why this is a problem to convince them to be part of a change.

On a more local level, I wanted to look at how this issue particularly impacts those on the autism spectrum in the local Syracuse community and how this hinders their ability to go grocery shopping. According to a study conducted by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, 689 children in Onondaga County have autism (Gillibrand 2009). This means that up to 689 children in

Onondaga County could be excluded from grocery shopping. For example, take Rose's experience: "If I am in a café and my friends are talking, I struggle because I am forcing myself to be attentive but I feel so overwhelmed. I can hear and feel and see everything. The cafes where they heat their milk crazy loud make me lose control. A lot of the time this is internalised though. I suffer but continue or mask it because I actively try so hard to function like everyone else does" (National Autistic Society).

While this incident did not take place in a grocery store, it is in another public place with many similarities. Rose's experience highlights how there are many things going on at one time that cause anxiety for people with autism. This often goes unnoticed by others but can create an incredibly stressful situation. Due to the stress of this environment, people with autism often choose to avoid these types of public settings, creating forced exclusion. If accommodations were made to make this setting less overwhelming, they would be able to be there more comfortably and not have to avoid these settings. Without these accommodations, they feel the need to exclude themselves.

#### Autism Hour:

These specific accommodations are made by instituting a "Quieter Hour." I came across an article describing how some large retailers are making efforts to create a more manageable shopping experience for people on the autism spectrum (Yeginsu 2018). A large grocery chain called Morrison's in the United Kingdom implemented some changes to aid in this effort. "Dim the lights. Silence the piped-in music. Turn down the checkout beeps. For an hour on Saturdays, a British supermarket chain is introducing a weekly 'quieter hour' aimed at helping people with autism have a better shopping experience by easing sensory overload." (Yeginsu 2018)



A quieter hour makes the changes necessary to make the grocery store less overwhelming. All of the things listed by Morrison's are crucial components of a quieter hour. In addition to these changes, an education component is really important. Employees at stores participating in a Quieter Hour must be educated about autism so they are aware of who will be shopping in the store and how best to interact with customers on the spectrum. To further awareness, posters are often hung on the doors of the grocery store to inform other customers of the Quieter Hour. This way, they are aware and can be careful to help contribute to the friendly atmosphere and be more mindful of the shoppers around them.

My Action Plan for Citizenship and Civic Engagement was to try to bring a Quieter Hour to a Wegmans in the Syracuse community. My Honors Thesis aims to assess and evaluate my efforts in doing so. Along the way, I ran into many obstacles that hindered my ability to get this initiative implemented. I learned about the limits of a social enterprise, or a company that claims corporate responsibility. I learned how "community-based" initiatives come from the top of the hierarchy and rarely include engagement with the local community to develop initiatives that benefit them. I learned how individual stores lack the autonomy to implement initiatives that they support. While I did achieve some successes along the way, my ultimate failure was due the hierarchical structure of the corporation I chose.

This is non-traditional Honors Thesis in that it is a blend of different styles of learning. I have used this project to hybridize both the theoretical, data-heavy approach that Honors has taught me with the grassroots, community-based education I attained in Citizenship and Civic Engagement. I did in-depth research before going out into the community to try to execute my Action Plan and am now doing significant research into the problems I ran into and evaluating my successes and failures to make a further plan for action. In this project, I combined both a

theoretical approach and practical approach instead of a traditional Honors Thesis that sets out to answer a specific research question.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The literature below guided the creation and execution of my project. It has been divided into two parts: Rethinking Autism and Quieter Hour Literature. The first part aims to provide general information about autism. It helps to define the condition and the affected population, as well as define the problem of exclusion. The second part aims to define a Quieter Hour, both in terms of what it is and why it matters. This helps to understand the proposed solution, where it is being done, and how successful it has been.

### *Rethinking Autism -*

According to Solomon and Bagatell (2010), people are starting to rethink how autism should be viewed. While it was once a devastating diagnosis, it is now being viewed simply as a different way to see the world. It explains how many with autism are fully functional in social situations and in society as a whole. The authors use this new view and other empirical evidence to suggest that inclusion is what we must be moving towards. Since people with autism are able to function in society, we should be treating them accordingly.

This push towards inclusion came firstly in the educational domain, as it pertained to students with special educational needs. As explained by Oliver and Barnes (2010), “[i]nclusive education is about the education of all children which necessitates serious changes, both in terms of society and its economic, social conditions and relations and in the schools of which they are a part”. In this initial push for inclusion in education, it is made clear that accommodations needed to be made for children with special needs. They would be able to function in any academic setting if the schools made the changes necessary. It demands that this happen to end the exclusion of students with special needs from certain schools and create inclusion at any school.

This was a change from the previous approach, that children with special needs should go to “special needs schools”, a very exclusionary idea. The more modern inclusionary approach now continues into most domains, beyond education. Disability rights advocates have taken this argument and applied it to most aspects of life to push for inclusion everywhere.

In an effort to try to move towards this model of inclusion, Ryan (2010) conducted a study that interviewed many families with children on the autism spectrum. It aimed to uncover the biggest problems when going out in public with a child that has autism. From these interviews, the researchers discovered that it is the unpredictability of the child’s response and the unpredictability of the audience’s response. Since autism does not have physical indicators, many people around are rude to parents, assuming they are allowing their children to misbehave in a store when a child is actually experiencing sensory overload. The main issue is the lack of understanding from the audience present. This is an especially important piece of information when considering how to design, implement and sustain an effective Quieter Hour at a business like a grocery store, by understanding that education and increased awareness is a very important component.

To understand potential issues that may arise from moving towards inclusion, it is important to understand the common triggers for people with autism. Pictured below are the results of a study published in the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Behavior*.

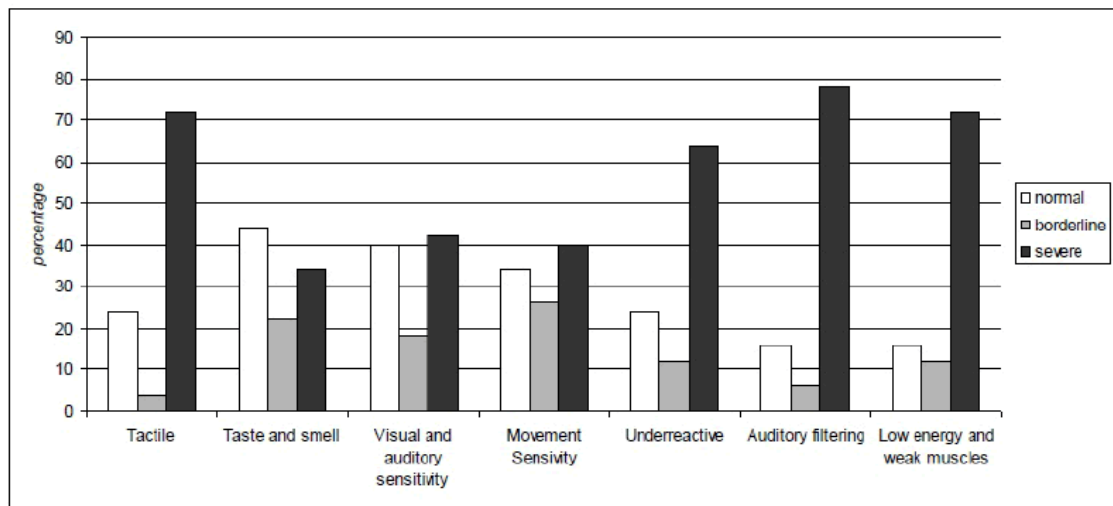


Figure 1: Frequencies % of the distribution of sensory disorders in children with ASD.

(Renzo, Castelbianco, Vanadia, Petrillo, Rea 2017)

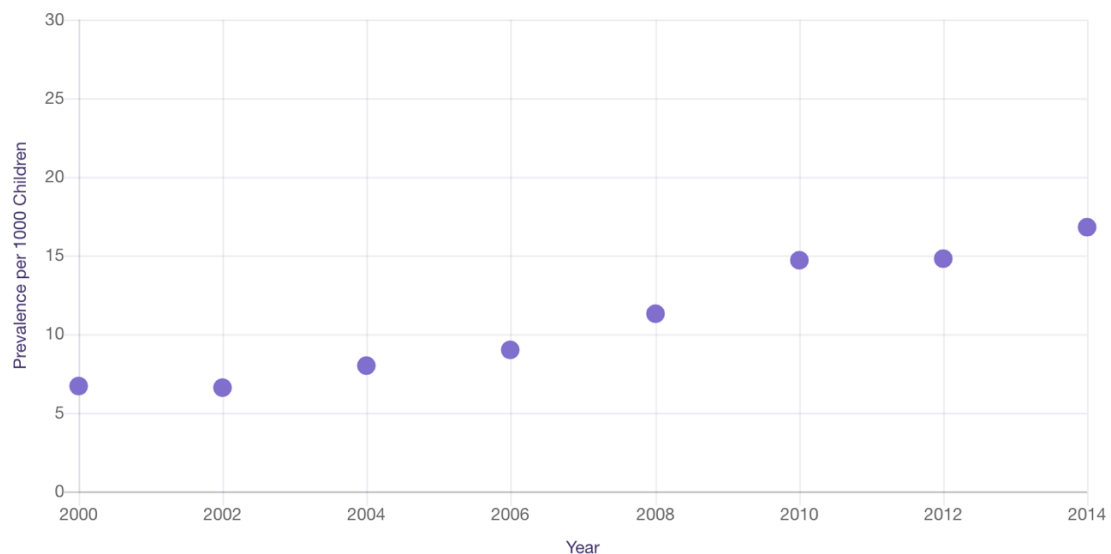
This graph depicts the most common sensory disorders for children on the autism spectrum which indicates what types of triggers they would be sensitive to. These illustrate how many places could become overwhelming for someone with autism since these triggers are all very common, particularly as they are so applicable to a grocery store setting. For example, given that nearly 80% of the respondents reported issues with auditory filtering, it is clear that minimizing noise is a crucial component. The other categories that are especially applicable are taste and smell, visual and auditory sensitivity and movement sensitivity since these are very present in a grocery store.

To help understand this issue of sensory overload, the National Autistic Society explains what sensory overload actually feels like by creating a video that has flashing lights, loud sounds and very bright colors ([www.autism.org.uk/sensory#](http://www.autism.org.uk/sensory#)). This helps to show exactly how overwhelming this experience might be. Next, it details ways to help when sensory overload occurs and what precautions to take to ensure that it happens as little as possible. As explained previously by Sara Ryan, one of the main issues with autism is a lack of understanding of what

autism looks and feels like, so this video aims to shed light on this experience to foster understanding.

Lastly, the Center for Disease Control (2018) published a fact sheet about autism which helped me get a better overall picture of this specific population. Some of the major findings include that 1 in 59 people have autism, boys are four times more likely to have autism than girls and the average age of diagnosis is four years old. While this helps understand the population that is most affected by this (typically, young boys), it is important to note that the CDC states that “[autism spectrum disorder] is reported to occur in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups”. Even when trying to narrow down the population to better understand it, it is crucial to remember that anyone can get an autism diagnosis, regardless of their gender, class, or race.

Additionally, rates of autism are on the rise. The graph below depicts the number of children with autism per 1,000 in the country. This graph uses data from 2016.



(<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data/index.html#data>)

Going further, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand also conducted a study to determine the number of children with autism in every county in New York. This study states that 689 children in Onondaga County have autism. In Central New York, 1,554 children have autism. In New York state, 1 in 150 children has autism. This is a very large portion of the population suggesting that attention should be paid to this group. In emphasizing this, the study states that the number of children with autism is even “more than pediatric cancer, diabetes and AIDS combined” (Gillibrand 2009).

This data helps give a clearer picture of autism as a whole, making it easier to explain why a Quieter Hour is necessary and further tailor the initiative to suit the targeted population’s needs. It is clear that many people are affected by autism and the number continues to grow. Due to these facts, it is clear that action needs to be taken to ensure that this large group of people is included in society, instead of following an outdated model of exclusion.

#### *Quieter Hour Literature -*

The National Autistic Society, a charity based in the United Kingdom, details information about “autism hour” (or a “Quieter Hour”). This charity assists with school placement, improving educational experience, community building and by helping provide professional resources when necessary. It works with people with autism and their caregivers, as well as professional providers in this field. The National Autistic Society explains, “[e]veryone, no matter who they are, has the right to an enjoyable shopping experience. Autism Hour involves such simple changes that make a huge difference to those on the autism spectrum.” (National Autistic Society). In outlining the scope of the problem, it follows that “[t]here are 700,000 autistic people in the UK. Along with their families, that's over 3 million customers waiting to be

welcomed into your business. Over 99% of people have heard of autism, but only 16% of autistic people feel the public understand them.” (National Autistic Society).

The National Autistic Society explains why a quieter hour is important and the positive impact it has had on individuals and families that struggle with autism by asking many who have been affected. Andy, a young man that was diagnosed with autism over twenty years ago, explains, “[a quieter hour] is a chance for me to go shopping without feeling overwhelmed. Also, it's an opportunity for businesses to understand autistic people and improve their services to autistics.” (National Autistic Society). Andy further explains how he feels about shopping by stating, “[s]hopping for me can be tricky. Mainly due to shops being overcrowded. I find some shops play really loud music and bright lights which does overwhelm me to the point where I have to prepare myself to venture to the shop.” (National Autistic Society). Andy highlights how the changes that are made during a quieter hour really do help ease some of the triggers that people with autism have.

Many of these changes are listed by The National Autistic Society in a set of guidelines they created for a Quieter Hour. These guidelines include turning down the music and trying to mute other noise as much as possible, dimming the lights and educating employees about autism. While some places institute more changes to try to make the environment even more welcoming, these are the basic changes the National Autistic Society requests that a business makes to have a true “Quieter Hour”.

A Quieter Hour is an especially important movement in the United Kingdom, as the social model of disability has risen in popularity. In this model, “the emphasis shifts to how far, and in what ways, society restricts [disabled persons’] opportunities to participate in mainstream economic and social activities rendering them more or less dependent. This approach has been a



key influence on social policy in general, and disability policy” (Oliver and Barnes 2010). This model aims to look at how society has forced disabled persons to be excluded and how society can be changed to promote inclusion. This way of viewing disability has helped to understand that a great deal of exclusion comes from societal barriers, and inclusion requires eliminating those.

A quieter hour is an effort that falls within some of the solutions of a social model of disability. Yeginsu (2018) describes a “Quieter Hour” at Morrison’s, a supermarket chain in the United Kingdom. Morrison’s was the first major chain to institute this initiative. This chain implemented the guidelines by the National Autistic Society in all of the store’s 500 locations every Saturday morning from 9-10am. The author explains how a quieter hour at Morrison’s includes dimming the lights, turning off checkout sounds, not using the PA system, etc. All of this is done to make the grocery a more approachable place for those with autism.

In addition to grocers in the United Kingdom, grocers in Australia have begun instituting quieter hours. Frank Chung (2018) details how a very large supermarket chain in Australia, called Coles, instituted a quieter hour. The main features of the Quieter Hour are similar to those of Morrison’s. Chung explains that, “[d]uring Quiet Hour, lighting is reduced, Coles Radio is switched off, register and scanning volume reduced to the lowest level and PA announcements are stopped except in emergencies. Trolley collections are also paused and roll cages removed from the shop floor, while additional customer service staff are available and free fruit is offered.” (Chung 2018).

Much of this article focused on how Coles greatly expanded the number of stores participating in a Quieter Hour. They initially tried this in two stores, expanded to 70 after experiencing great success, and then continued expansion to an additional 103 stores, as this

article describes. This shows how quieter hours are becoming commonplace in other countries, which raises the question of why this is not happening in the United States.

In searching for Quieter Hours in the United States, my search came up short. One of the only articles I found about this was one by Jared Leone (2016) which explains how some Toys R Us stores and one Target instituted a Quieter Hour during the holiday season three years ago. This followed the basic guidelines by dimming the lights, turning off the music and creating specific quiet zones in the store. The article noted success, as a ten-year-old boy with autism was able to pick out his gift of choice in the store, which he had not been able to do in the past. The Quieter Hour was done after Toys R Us stores implemented this and observed success in the United Kingdom. This was an expansion by the company.

However, this expansion was temporary. Although there was noted success, the Quieter Hour did not continue. Even while many companies in other countries are trying out this initiative and continue to expand it, the United States has not made a major effort that I was able to find. For me, this was a big point of confusion since there has been documented success with this effort and a model to follow. This raised the question of “why?” and foreshadowed some of the issues I would encounter when trying to get a Quieter Hour started in Syracuse.

### Chapter 3 – Implementation

Once I had done my research on Quieter Hours, I decided that Wegmans would be my best target store. Wegmans is a regional supermarket chain that began in Rochester, New York. The store began as a produce store called Rochester Fruit & Vegetable Company and grew into the corporation that it is now with almost 100 locations. Wegmans is ranked number three by Fortune Magazine on their list of the “*100 Best Companies to Work For*”. (Wegmans).

On the Wegmans website, their values statement reads, “[w]e care about the well-being and success of every person; High standards are a way of life. We pursue excellence in everything we do; We make a difference in every community we serve; We respect and listen to our people; We empower our people to make decisions that improve their work and benefit our customers and our company” (Wegmans). Not only does Wegmans highlight their commitment to the community through their values, but they further this by engaging in charitable activities and donations. Wegmans states that they give “[e]xceptional levels of charitable donations focused on programs that reduce hunger; help young people succeed; promote healthy eating and activity; strengthen neighborhoods; and support United Way initiatives. Last year, Wegmans donated about 14.5 million pounds of food to local food banks and programs that feed the hungry” (Wegmans).

With their significant stated commitment to the community, I decided that this was a great target for a Quieter Hour. If I chose a smaller store, I believed it might not have as large of an impact as I wanted because it would not have as wide of an audience. If I chose another store that does not emphasize their charitable efforts, they likely would not be as willing to commit to something new like this. This made Wegmans seem like the perfect fit.

Once I made this decision, I wanted to reach out to the community that I hoped this project would serve to get their thoughts on it. Before I began the major work of the project, I wanted to make sure it would actually help the people I intended. To get this feedback, I reached out to the Central New York chapter of the Autism Society of America. They were very interested in the project and kindly added me to their Facebook group that serves as a support group for people that have children with autism in Central New York. Once in the group, I made a post that explained what a Quieter Hour is and asked if this is something that they believed would be helpful.

The comments on this post made it clear to me that there was definitely a need and a desire for this project. There were over 20 responses by group members that stated their interest and desire for this initiative. Some shared personal stories about how their children are unable to go to grocery stores and how that can be very upsetting for them. One woman even stated that she thought this was a great idea even for people not on the spectrum to simply provide them a more relaxing experience if needed. These people were so enthusiastic about the idea in their comments but also in private messages they sent me encouraging implementation. This served as my personal data collection that helped me assess the local situation and the support for this idea in the local community.

My first efforts for this project began by going into the Fairmount Wegmans per a recommendation by a member of the CNY ASA. This woman told me that the staff at this Wegmans location had been understanding of her son with autism's sensitivities and had been helpful while they did their grocery shopping. I began by asking if starting a weekly Quieter Hour was possible. I spoke with the store manager, who then told me I needed to talk to Evelyn at Corporate who is the Director of Community Relations.

I left Evelyn two messages before getting a response on my third call. She sent me to her assistant who told me that Evelyn was simply too busy with the holidays around the corner, so she did not have time for this type of initiative at the moment. This was early November, so Thanksgiving and Christmas were nearing. I asked if there was another time that they would be able to discuss this idea but was just told they did not know.

Unhappy with this answer, I went to the DeWitt Wegmans and spoke with this store manager. He was very kind and told me that he loved the idea but unfortunately could not execute it on his own. He explained that he needed permission from corporate and also did not have the right tools to be able to do it himself. This location does not have dimmers on the lights so they would need to turn some off and were worried that this was a safety issue. They said they did not think there was a setting to turn off check out sounds at the registers. There were various small issues which began to add up but without permission from corporate, a Quieter Hour would not be possible at Wegmans regardless.

I found these responses very surprising and disheartening. One of the reasons I really like Wegmans is because of their community dedication. I find it very important to give back to the community, especially as a large corporation with the ability to do so. Wegmans has emphasized similar values and publicizes their charitable endeavors so I thought this would be a relatively easy sell. I knew that working out the logistics would take a lot of work, but I did not anticipate that it would be difficult to get them on board with the idea.

I learned a lot about how difficult it can be to interact with stakeholder communities. This type of community is structured in a very hierarchical way, making it incredibly difficult to communicate with the people who actually wield the power. Instead, I learned that charitable initiatives (with the exception of local sponsorships and some donations) come from the top and

are handed down to lower level employees to execute. Due to this set up, it is very difficult to get an initiative like this in motion since the only people I am able to talk to are not the ones who have the power to make this decision. These observations made up the majority of the roadblocks I faced in my experience trying to get this initiative started.

#### Overcoming the Roadblocks:

The first issue I encountered while trying to implement my project was the lack of people in the Community Relations department. I had to leave multiple messages for Evelyn before getting a response. It became clear to me that there was no one else who could, or was willing, to help me with my request which resulted in a very long response time. While I understand it is possible there are more people working in the department than I am assuming, I was only given this one point of contact. Even if there are more people, it seems that they were not able to assist me with my requests, which further contributed to my challenges.

Additionally, my experience communicating with the Community Relations department showed me that Wegmans is not designed to take on smaller initiatives. While looking at the Wegmans's website, I began to understand how their *engagement* with the community is done on a very large scale. One of their biggest campaigns is for food sharing/hunger relief which does actually entail going out into the community and providing food for many who need it and giving food to local food pantries (Wegmans). However, most of their philanthropic activity outside of this is fully monetary. This is exemplified through their financial support to the United Way and to employee scholarships. Below is a graph created by Wegmans detailing their "2017 Giving".

# 2017 Giving—Customer, Employee, & Company



<https://www.wegmans.com/about-us/making-a-difference.html>

When examining their support of local communities (“community-wide donations & events category), I realized how this is also almost completely financial support. Wegmans has a form one can fill out to request local sponsorships, fund youth sports, provide disaster relief and allow organizations to request funding. However, there is no place for requests for actual action. While Wegmans prides itself on being involved in the community and prides itself on building community relationships, they have not yet made an effort to do so in a way that exceeds a financial contribution.

While these two issues presented me with several difficulties, another important one was the lack of autonomy within the chain. When I first asked the store manager at the Fairmount Wegmans about implementing a Quieter Hour, she was very excited about the idea and told me she wished she could make this happen on her own, but that it needed to be approved and implemented by corporate. Similarly, when I went to the DeWitt Wegmans after I had been told no by Evelyn’s assistant, the store manager at this location said the same thing. He told me how he thought it was a great idea and felt that it would benefit the local community that shopped at his store. However, he also told me that he was not able to implement something like this without corporate approval.

This creates a big issue for a store that says it is dedicated to the community. The normal atmosphere of a grocery store is not conducive to a pleasant shopping experience for so many people that would like to shop there. By declining to take on the initiative of creating a Quieter Hour, Wegmans is knowingly continuing to exclude these people. This lack of ability to take action is a major component that is missing from their infrastructure that should be added in order to better achieve their community related mission.



## Chapter 4 – New Plan for Execution

Before I could move forward with a new plan for execution, it was crucial that I examine the biggest roadblock I encountered: my misunderstanding of the social enterprise model. I thought this model indicated flexibility to accommodate serving a specific community. However, I learned quickly through my engagement with Wegmans that this is not how they are set up. While this may not be true for all social enterprises, my interactions with Wegmans showed me that corporate hierarchy still very much applied, making it very difficult to create a new community initiative.

### Strength and Weaknesses of the Social Enterprise Model:

Wegmans community commitment is not a unique concept. Many corporations have a stated commitment to corporate responsibility and charitable endeavors. In many cases these organizations are known as social enterprises. I sought to learn more about the social enterprise model to understand the structure and how this contributed to the lack of success in the implementation of a Quieter Hour.

Social enterprises are defined as “dynamic enterprises with a social purpose. They are based on the ‘triple bottom line’ principle, i.e., based on economic viability, environmental sustainability and social responsibility. They are not ‘charities’, but are businesses in the strict sense of the term” (Mathew 2008). As this definition states, social enterprises are businesses but form much of their business activity around this idea of social responsibility. They are focused on making as much profit as they can because they are a business, but also because this allows them to have more money for a charitable purpose.

While much of this is applicable to Wegmans, it is important to note that the true focus of a social enterprise is the purpose of social change in several different forms. The selling of goods and making profits is done as a means to make money for philanthropic reasons or to provide jobs. While giving back to the community may be an important part of the Wegmans mission, the store was not founded as a means to alleviate hunger or sponsor local youth. This is simply a charitable mission that they adopted when they became profitable enough to do so. Examining the social enterprise model is helpful in assessing my project but it is important to note that it is not a perfect fit.

Under this umbrella term of social enterprise, there are three main types: the innovation model, the employment model and the give back model (Cadwell 2018). The innovation model uses a business to solve a direct problem by creating products that will help underprivileged communities. They aim to assist a specific population by creating products that will help do so. This might look like someone creating an inexpensive water filter to sell to communities that have limited access to clean water. The employment model creates employment opportunities for those that need them. It hires people who would not otherwise have employment. This might look like a business that hires ex-criminals that have not been able to get other work. Lastly, the give back model gives something tangible to a community in need. For example, this would include a company that donates a pair of shoes to a child in need for every pair sold.

These three types of social enterprises show how indirectly involved these organizations are with the community. While they are doing a great deal to be able to give back to a specific group, they are not doing so by going out into that community to directly interact with them. They focus more on large scale initiatives than small ones that make a difference with local communities.

This model helped me to understand how unfeasible a model with direct community engagement would be. While working on my project, I made several assumptions about Wegmans based on their dedication to the community that were not true. I assumed that Wegmans had staff that helped with local initiatives which would be able to help me get my project put in motion. I thought there were people who helped coordinate these types of project. However, I now know that this is not true and understand why. This would take a completely different team that would act with the sole purpose of volunteering in the community. While this would be a great thing, it is not financially beneficial for a for-profit company or for a social enterprise.

More importantly than my misjudgment of the Wegmans staff, I assumed that Wegmans was a social enterprise. I thought that their business side was more intertwined with their philanthropic side. I assumed that this was a leading factor in how they run their business. It became quickly apparent to me that this is not the case. While Wegmans does seem to care a lot of their philanthropic initiatives, they are a business first and a charitable organization second.

This research showed me how if I want my project done, I will need to do more work to get it there. Since Wegmans does not have the infrastructure that I assumed they would have to take on a project like this, I would need to fill that role. While I would love to continue working on this project, knowing that I am graduating and moving away limits my ability severely in continuing this project in the Syracuse area. What I have done is get the project going and this leaves the door open for it to be continued if I can find the right people to do so. I have come up with two feasible options for this: a rising senior in Citizenship and Civic Engagement who could continue my Action Plan, or an autism advocacy group to continue working on this initiative. A rising senior with the passion for this project would be able to continue working on

it with a new plan that I have set up and have the ability to hand it down again to another future student if it still needs work to get going. This creates a line of people that could continue the work that I began with a clear path for continuation, should the need still be present.

Secondly, engaging the CNY ASA or other local autism advocacy groups could be a way to get this accomplished. These groups would likely have more push in terms of getting this done since they are part of an organization and would have larger numbers than just one student. Additionally, they have the passion and first-hand knowledge of what a Quieter Hour could do for their community. Ideally, I think having a student carry this project on and work on it in partnership with an advocacy group would be the best plan of action.

While I understand that this would be a lot of communication and coordination between Wegmans corporate and their actual stores, I do not think this would be a too big of a task for Wegmans to take on. However, I do understand the limitations a company would have in being able to take on an initiative that asks for special arrangements every week and goes beyond a financial contribution. I still believe that this is doable but will take more time and work than I initially realized. I think they would be especially motivated to do this with the encouragement and request of an autism advocacy group.

### *New Plan for Execution*

After my first attempt at implementation, I have learned a lot about what avenues would be more likely to lead to success. From these experiences, I have two proposals for a new plan for execution.

Plan One: Locate a local grocery store and become familiar with it. With a knowledge and familiarity with the store, speaking with managerial staff will be easy. I would then approach

the manager and speak with them about the idea of implementing a Quieter Hour. A local grocery store would likely have one location or just a few. This means that getting this idea approved would be significantly easier because it does not need to be approved by corporate. The manager and owner would be much more accessible and have the ability to make this decision on their own. It is also likely that they would have more of a dedication to the community because it is probably the one they live in. While Wegmans may be committed to the community, it is such a large chain that there probably is not a personal connection to the direct community, making them feel less passionate about a local initiative.

Assuming all goes well and this local store agrees to have a Quieter Hour once per week, I would advertise the Quieter Hour to the local autism community. I would post this in the CNY ASA Facebook page to follow up and let them know that the Quieter Hour has been implemented, just at a different store than originally planned. The organization itself also told me they would print an article about it in their monthly newsletter to help spread the word. I would ask that this community continue to spread the word around to their friends and people that would benefit from the quieter hour.

Next, I would visit the store during this hour to see who comes to shop, speak to the customers and speak to the staff. I would want to see how effectively the information was spread and see if people with autism are actually coming during this hour or if it is still just the normal clientele. Additionally, I would want to speak with the staff (managerial and also lower level employees) to see how their experience has been with it. Have the cashiers noticed an increase in people with autism shopping during this time? Has their reaction been positive? What have the challenges been? Have the managers gotten feedback about the Quieter Hour? Do they feel that it has made any sort of difference? Do they believe it is worth their time? How do the shoppers

feel about it? Have they changed their grocery store or grocery shopping time in order to shop during the quieter hour?

All of these questions would help me to gather data about the Quieter Hour in Syracuse and assess how successful or unsuccessful it is. I would record all of these responses and make that decision. If I feel that it has been successful, I would reach out to Wegmans again about implementing a Quieter hour. However, this time I would have data and proof that it is happening in Syracuse, people have a desire for it, and it is a success. This type of data would help make a more convincing argument and give them a model to base their Quieter Hour off of.

While I feel confident that this would help make a compelling argument, if it did not, I would continue on by garnering public support. I would do so by creating an online petition and sharing it with the CNY ASA Facebook page. I would ask them to sign it and pass it along to their friends if they feel they might also be interested in signing it. Next, I would submit an Op-Ed to Syracuse.com (see Appendix A) to raise awareness and convince readers that this is important. These two things could help create a larger conversation about making a Quieter Hour a normal occurrence and this type of conversation would put pressure on Wegmans to respond.

Plan Two: Approach Wegmans again now that the holidays have passed. Since I never got a chance to even speak with Evelyn about the idea, hopefully now she would have the time to have a meeting. I would remind her that I tried to discuss this idea with her previously but that she told me she did not have time then. I would let her know that I am still very interested in creating a Quieter Hour at Wegmans and see if we could make a time to discuss.

Assuming she agrees to the meeting, I would show her the flyer I made with details about a Quieter Hour and why they should begin having them (see Appendix B). I would show her the Facebook post to highlight the fact that there is a need and desire for this. I think my most

convincing argument is how successful it has been in other countries and how it got so much buzz that I found out about a Quieter Hour at a grocery chain in the UK in my LinkedIn newsfeed in the United States. This demonstrates how people care about this and shared these articles because they supported the idea. This has not been done by a major retailer yet in the United States, so Wegmans could get this same type of buzz if they were to start hosting Quieter Hours.

If Evelyn did not agree to the meeting or if she said no to my request afterwards, I would continue the plan for trying to get an Op-Ed about a Quieter Hour published on Syracuse.com and create a petition. Either way, I think this public support would help create pressure on Wegmans to implement a Quieter Hour. This would show them that people are serious about it and hopefully create an incentive to do so. I think this would be a very convincing tactic but would just require reaching out to the right groups of people that would support the idea, sign the petition and pass it along to their friends, or that would share the Op-Ed article from Syracuse.com.

## Conclusion:

My honors thesis allowed me to evaluate my experience with civic engagement as I tried to implement a Quieter Hour at a Wegmans in Syracuse. I looked at the experience that I had and evaluated my successes and failures by researching them and more deeply understanding why my efforts failed. I delved into the research on autism, both about autism as a whole and about autism in the local Syracuse community, and found that there is a true need for a Quieter Hour. By learning from my research about sensory overload and autism triggers, and from speaking with people in Syracuse who are affected by autism, I came to better understand why Quieter Hours have become somewhat common in other countries. I found that people support this idea and I just need to figure out a more effective way to get it implemented since I know the support is there, both from people who are affected by autism and by those who are not.

From this thesis, I learned that disability and inclusion are viewed in a different way in the United States than they are in the United Kingdom and Australia. In reviewing the literature on Quieter Hours and the great success they have had in these countries, I kept asking myself why that is not happening here. My perception of this is that the United States has not yet moved to this social model of disability, therefore is not yet ready to make these changes that need to happen in order to promote inclusion. I do not think the modern model of inclusion is widespread enough in the US for this type of initiative.

Additionally, I learned that a Quieter Hour really does have a purpose and is successful in what it sets out to accomplish. On most of the autism advocacy websites I visited, there were multitudes of testimonials by people on the spectrum about how public settings are too overwhelming for them. They describe their experience with sensory overload, and how that is so traumatizing that they simply choose to exclude themselves from these settings than subject



themselves to that experience. While when I first read about Quieter Hours, I thought it sounded like a good idea. However, from my research for this thesis, I now *know* that it is a good idea and that it would well serve the community I intended.

Lastly, I learned that corporate community engagement is more limited and less flexible than I anticipated. I thought that companies that boasted of their dedication to the community would have a department set up to take on small initiatives in addition to large-scale donation campaigns. What I learned is that they have a select list of initiatives that they take on as a corporation and lack the ability to take on anything new beyond those since the infrastructure does not exist for this. If I could make one recommendation to a store like Wegmans, it would be to invest in one person or a department of people who are able to listen to the needs of the community and respond. In my opinion, this is true corporate responsibility and should be a model for large corporations.

Overall, I learned that civic engagement is hard. Anyone involved in civic engagement would likely laugh at that as one of my biggest take-aways, but it is true. While I knew this before embarking on this project, it became even more clear to me after. I hit roadblocks after roadblock and started to feel defeated. But this is often typical of civic engagement and caused me to learn that I just need to fight harder for the things that are important to me.

More importantly though, I learned that it is worth it. Even though I was not able to bring a Quieter Hour to Syracuse, I opened the door to this possibility down the road and learned a lot of incredibly important things about autism and the autism community in Syracuse. I spoke with people that I never would have otherwise, and I learned about corporate structure. At the end of this project, I think the biggest thing that I learned is that civic engagement is not just about achieving the goal, but all of the things you achieve and people you meet along the way.

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## **Appendix A:**

### Op-Ed for Syracuse.com

Grocery shopping is something we often take for granted, but can you imagine not being able to go at all? 64% of people with autism avoid shops and stores. This means that they never get to go grocery shopping because it is often too overwhelming.

To help remedy this problem, Wegmans should institute a “quieter hour” for one hour per week. A quieter hour is when a store dims the lights halfway, turns off checkout register sounds, turn off background music, discontinues use of the PA system and posts appropriate flyers or posters to inform shoppers that it is a quieter hour. All of these adjustments are simple for Wegmans but make a large difference for people on the spectrum.

Many with autism struggle in grocery stores because there is simply too much going on. It is loud, it is crowded, and people move at a very fast pace. People with autism process stimuli differently and this causes them to experience sensory overload often leading to panic attacks. This causes them to avoid grocery stores, excluding them from an experience that most people take for granted. By implementing these changes, people with autism will be included in a part of society where they have previously been excluded.

A Quieter Hour is not a new idea. Morrison’s, the fourth largest grocery store retailer in the United Kingdom, has a quieter hour in all 498 of their locations on Saturdays from 9-10 in the morning. Additionally, Coles, a large grocery store chain in Australia, has a quieter hour in 173 of their 807 locations on Tuesdays from 10:30-11:30 in the morning. These grocery stores have expanded this program immensely because they observed results. These changes made a big difference for those with autism, so they continued the program and expanded it throughout the chain.

Some argue that a Quieter Hour is unnecessary because there are quieter times to grocery shop which would have the same effect without inconveniencing the grocery store. However, there is a fundamental difference. The quiet times at grocery stores are either very late at night or very early in the morning. Grocery shopping is a social experience where one sees other people and often interacts with others. By expecting that someone with autism just go to the grocery store when it is empty, one is furthering promoting exclusion. A quieter hour encourages inclusion and provides a chance for social interaction.

Instituting a Quieter Hour is a very important initiative for Wegmans. As a grocery store that prides itself on a commitment to the community, this an important way to include a group of people that is being excluded. Not only does this make the grocery store a more welcoming place for those with autism, but it also gives people who are not on the spectrum an opportunity to better understand autism by giving them the ability to actually see or interact with someone that is on the spectrum. A Quieter Hour requires small changes that would make a big difference to many people in the community. This is a really important step for Wegmans to take and would reinforce their dedication to the community.

## Appendix B:

Promoting inclusion by making grocery shopping more sensory friendly

# A "QUIETER HOUR" FOR WEGMANS

PROPOSED BY RACHEL BRACHMAN

## WHAT IS A QUIETER HOUR?

One hour per week where a store limits unnecessary noise and bright lighting in order to make a shopping experience less overwhelming. 64% of people with autism avoid going to stores because the environment often leads to sensory overstimulation. Small changes can create an environment where one with autism can visit and shop more comfortably.



## WHAT THIS REQUIRES

- Dimming the lights halfway
- Turning off background music
- Turning off checkout sounds
- Not using the PA system
- Sharing relevant autism information with employees
- Hanging up appropriate signage so other shoppers are aware of the quieter hour

## WHY A QUIETER HOUR?

As a store with a dedication to the community, this is a great way to welcome many who would not otherwise be able to go to the grocery store. This is a great opportunity for Wegmans to show their dedication to inclusivity. This has been done in other countries and received much publicity, but has not yet been done by a large retailer in the United States.

## QUIETER HOURS EXAMPLES

- Morrison's, the 4th largest supermarket chain in the UK, has a quieter hour in all 498 locations every Saturday from 9-10am.
- Coles Supermarket in Australia has a quieter hour in 173 of their 807 locations every Tuesday from 10:30-11:30am.



## QUIETER HOUR PRESS

- New York Times, "UK Supermarket to Have 'Quieter Hour' for People with Autism (July 19, 2018)"
- news.com.au, "Coles expands quiet hour to 173 stores" (September 10, 2018)