Autism is an epidemic. You’ve probably heard that discussed on the news, in television shows, or online somewhere. But what does that mean, exactly? Well, before we answer that question, before we really get into why this is such a hot-button topic in everything from academic think tanks to the Today show, let’s take a look at a few statistics that should give you an indication of just exactly how extensive the problem is:

- Every 20 minutes, sports radio stations simulcast an update.
- Every 20 minutes, an average of 20 kites are made.
- Every 20 minutes, a child is diagnosed with autism (according to the Parker Autism Foundation and numerous other sources).

Every 20 minutes, a child is diagnosed with autism. I don’t know about you, but when I heard that statistic, especially when put in context with those other statistics, I was amazed. Every 20 minutes. That’s a pretty short span of time. It means that, depending on how fast a reader you are, from the time you started reading this introduction to right now, at least one child with autism entered this world.

As I mentioned in my introduction, autism is a pervasive developmental disorder that affects millions of children in the United States and abroad. To watch kids, or adults, with autism is to watch people engaging in behaviors that can seem strange to most people: hand-flapping, toe-walking, an obsession with certain colors or objects to the exclusion of everything else, and a seeming obliviousness to the world around them. To define autism in neurological terms, however, let’s first learn a little bit about how the brain works. In the brains of typical students, both hemispheres work together. They pass information back and forth, like two
partners working on a project, or like two students crunching a deadline together. Each side has its responsibilities, and those responsibilities are met through extensive, lightning-fast teamwork. In the brains of students with autism, however, the two hemispheres work simultaneously, side by side, but not together. This means that the information that needs to be passed back and forth isn’t shared the way it should be. To put that another way, imagine trying to listen to two songs at the same time, instead of one song right after the other. That’s what most information sounds like—and the way the world looks—to students with autism, every single day of their lives.

As I also said earlier, the number of students diagnosed with autism at present is exponentially higher than it was in generations past. Some people feel that the root cause is something in the environment or something that was transmitted through a batch of bad vaccines. Others claim that the increase is due in some part to more fine-tuned diagnostic tools used by psychologists and doctors; we are simply more aware of the symptoms and therefore are catching more cases than we used to, giving people a diagnosis of autism when, a generation ago, they simply would have been labeled as "strange" or not labeled at all. As far as I’m concerned, I don’t really care why the numbers are as high as they are; all I know is that they are and that I care to do whatever I can to make the existing situation better. Because along with autism’s emotional toll, which is immeasurable, there are other statistics that are nothing short of overwhelming when you think about them:

- According to a 2012 study funded by Autism Speaks (2012a) and conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and the London School of Economics, autism, with its considerable toll on school and social resources, costs over $137 billion, a cost that is expected to increase dramatically in the years to come.
- According to the Centers for Disease Control (Autism Speaks, 2012b), more children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with AIDS, diabetes, and cancer combined, and while psychologists and educators have made great strides in their respective fields, there is no medical cure for autism.

So why is this important? After all, everyone can read the paragraph above and conclude that it is sad, but sad conclusions alone, sadly enough, do not necessarily lead to action. Well, that’s where we come in. Autism Ambassadors’ philosophy is that, without a medical cure, programs like ours are the most effective way to raise the quality of life for students with special needs. We feel that, given how pervasive autism is in the worldwide community, autism is everyone’s responsibility, not only the responsibility of health care and educational professionals and parents with afflicted children. Virtually everyone knows someone with autism, which means that it is not some obscure medical affliction that can be ignored by the majority. At Autism Ambassadors, the key question that we ask ourselves is, if we don’t help, who will?

And where does all of this start? With the teacher, the concerned parent, the administrator, and, most of all, you—the student.