



**ORAL STATEMENT OF MARK X. CRONIN
BEFORE THE HELSINKI COMMISSION
September 24, 2018**

Good afternoon. My name is Mark X. Cronin and I am John's father and partner in John's Crazy Socks. We work to show what is possible, we work to show what people with a differing ability can do if given a chance.

In John's Crazy Socks, we have built a social enterprise; we have a social and a business mission and they are indivisible. Our social mission shows the world what people with a differing ability can do and we give back by supporting and raising money for our charity partners. But we can only succeed if we run a rigorous business. We compete with some of the largest and best companies in the world – Amazon, Wal-Mart and Target – and we must match or beat what they offer. To do good, we have to do well.

Hiring people with differing abilities serves our social mission, but it also serves our business mission. To succeed, we must provide great service, so we do same day shipping and that makes our customers happy. We hire people with differing abilities because they help us fulfill our mission. We do not hire people out of charity or altruism. We hire because it is good for business.

John told you that we have been fortunate enough to create 35 jobs with 18 held by people with differing abilities. Our starting pay is \$12 per hour, \$1 more than the New York State minimum wage. Our colleagues do not do minimum work, so we do not offer minimum pay. The sad reality is that we could pay less, much less, and many of our workers and their families would still welcome the job because meaningful work is so scarce. But that would be wrong. Taking advantage of vulnerable workers may put money in the bank, but it would be morally bankrupt.

Too often, people with differing abilities are not offered jobs or they can only find work in sheltered workshops. They might be offered positions out of pity or charity. Our business demonstrates that people with differing abilities are just like the rest of us: they want meaningful work where they can make a contribution and receive fair pay.

What does it take to hire people with differing abilities? We simply need to focus on what people can do, not what they cannot do. Match the skills of the worker to the job. We operate a pick and pack warehouse. Our warehouse workers – those with differing abilities and neuro-typical – all pass a test to prove they can do the job. No charity, just real work.

We have no government support and no special programs. Yes, we make accommodations for our differing abled, but we also make accommodations for our neuro-typical employees. We have created a unified workplace where people

of differing abilities work side-by-side with neuro-typical employees. And everyone benefits. We have better productivity, better morale and better retention.

And yet small accommodations can make a big difference. We make sure everyone has an email address and knows how to use email. We give everyone a business card as a symbol of their professionalism and watch as they proudly give them out to family and friends. And we schedule regular social events outside the office for all of our staff like attending a Chamber of Commerce dinner. Having a job gives our employees standing in the community. These are small initiatives, but they have a big impact on our differing abled population.

We have learned that hiring the differently abled gives us a competitive advantage. The United States and other nations are now facing shortages of workers, and yet we have a great untapped natural resource in the differently abled. Employers will learn that those with differing abilities are an asset, not a liability. And the employers who learn this lesson the fastest, will be at an advantage and find greater success.

Our governments need to make changes too. We need to see the differently abled as full-fledged citizens, people able to contribute, not helpless beings who need pity. We need laws that guarantee the same rights – including the same wages – as the neuro-typical population. Here in the U.S., the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 allows employers to pay the people with disabilities less

than a minimum wage. We are working with the National Down Syndrome Society to support passage of the TIME Act to afford all people a fair, minimum wage.

In the U.S. and elsewhere, we have benefits programs that limit the ability of the disabled to work. Our colleagues with disabilities work part-time. Why? Because if they work too many hours, they will lose their Medicaid and they cannot afford to do so. Take Aliya, who has a form of autism and works as a Sock Wrangler. Aliya does a great job and would love to work 40 hours per week but cannot because she cannot afford to lose her Medicaid. Don't we all want Aliya to work full-time? Then why have laws that limit how much she can work?

And my son John, he does not receive benefits yet. However, when he needs those benefits in the future, he will need to choose between his benefits and equity in the company that he has created. Do we want to prevent people from engaging in entrepreneurship?

It is time to decouple the poor from the disabled in our means-tested programs so that people with differing abilities can work full-time and maximize their contributions to society. We want to encourage people to work and to pay taxes, so let's remove the disincentives to work.

In the end, our message is simple. It is good business to hire people with differing abilities. John created his own future when he created John's Crazy Socks. We need more businesses that offer a future of meaningful work to all people. Employers here in the U.S. and around the world will come to learn that people with differing abilities make great employees.

John and I are a couple of simple guys from Long Island, a couple of knuckleheads selling socks. We have no special training and no special talents. If we can do this, anyone can. No more excuses. Let's show the world what is possible.