

# A GOOD SUBWAY STORY

## A visitor from Ireland and a good subway story



Nicholas Ryan-Purcell flew from Dublin to New York last week for Community Access' NYC Mental Health Film Festival. The festival was screening his movie, "This is Nicholas: Living With Autism Spectrum Disorder."

I happen to have been moderating the panel that followed the screening and included Ryan-Purcell, 28, and other filmmakers, so I had a front-row seat to the following communal experience.

Ryan-Purcell's movie told the story of all the people in and around his small Irish village of Emly who had helped him with his Asperger's syndrome and depression growing up. One thing he treasured: trains. The whir and blur of them going by.

Apparently the train scenes resonated with a particular man in the audience, who during the Q&A part of the panel told Ryan-Purcell that he thought the film was

beautiful, particularly the part about trains, because the audience member loved trains, too.

The audience member said he loved trains, and once drove them as an MTA worker. His train, he said, had struck people in the tracks which affected him mentally, but he still loved the subway. His question for Ryan-Purcell: Had the filmmaker sampled the MTA here in New York?

Ryan-Purcell paused for a moment, changing his grip on the microphone, and then he told this story: On the way to the Village East Cinema movie theater he had exited Bowling Green station and held a door for someone — it was his custom to hold doors — and the man he held it for nearly "bent over backwards" in surprise. Then the man smiled and said thank you. Ryan-Purcell said the smile made a huge difference in his day.

That was just one example of the various people in the subway system who had been kind. So yes, he had tried the trains here, and yes, he loved them.

The audience loved this, too.

In fact, it seemed as if Ryan-Purcell's story, a story of everyday niceness and how it made him feel, had encouraged the crowd. The floodgates opened, with a rush of questions — or really, statements — about what audience members were feeling or had felt, and ways to feel better. One man noted that if you're feeling depressed, it's best to get some therapy or at least think of something happy. In his case, he said, his thoughts turned to time spent at an amusement park with his cousin.

Another person said she'd been deeply affected by another movie that had just screened at the festival, about bullying. She remembered being bullied in high school. She cried. It had been a bad time. But the audience cheered for her and applauded until eventually, she was smiling.

There were other good moments like this that seemed to me had been launched by Ryan-Purcell's subway story. That felt good to me personally — it's nice when the subway treats its city well, and for about a day or so I felt good about the MTA, even when delayed.

Then after a particularly annoying train experience (Manhattan Bridge, train traffic ahead, people muttering darkly), I had the cynical thought that Ryan-Purcell might have just had beginner's luck. That perhaps even immediately after leaving that movie theater, the subway had failed him, and it was all a lie.

I reached Ryan-Purcell on Wednesday. He had just landed in Dublin. How had his visit been? Did the trains and NYC stand by him?

Yes, he said, the rest of his trip had been “absolutely brilliant.” And as a matter of fact about the subway: At one point he had gotten on a 1 train and didn't know where he was going. A man approached and asked whether he needed directions, and they ended up

chatting. They later exchanged emails. It's “intriguing who you can run into on the train,” Ryan-Purcell said.

His subway experience had been like that in general, he said, it made the city feel tight knit. It seemed like people looked out for each other.

Yes, the trains were good. They could be, at least.