
Participants:

Holly Carmichael
Michael Murray
Tony Coelho



[Audio Length: 0:14:21]

RECORDING BEGINS

Introduction:

A garrison is a safe place where an army gathers. In the same way, the *Disability Garrison Podcast* is a place for the army of disability rights advocates to gather and discuss complex issues. We are unafraid to identify problems in our world and have difficult conversations about them. But we are not just here to complain. We spend our time brainstorming solutions with generals in the disability rights movement. Together, we take action to make positive change and lead the fight for justice and equality.

Holly Carmichael:

My name is Holly Carmichael.

Michael Murray:

My name is Michael Murray. This is the Disability Garrison.

Holly Carmichael:

Welcome to this special edition of the Disability Garrison. If you're joining us for the first time, if you're coming back after a while, we're happy that you're here. We do encourage you to go back and listen to episode 6. This is the second episode in a three-part mini episode series with our dear friend, the honorable Tony Coelho. For these three special episodes, we're not posing a problem and then giving solutions like we normally do. Rather, Holly and I are listening Tony talk about various parts of his life and the impact that he's had on America frankly. So everything he experienced eventually led to him becoming the primary author of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

So in tandem with these episodes, we're also running this super awesome campaign called the I Can Campaign on GT Independence's Facebook page. We want to hear from you. What are some of the things that have had a huge impact in your life because of the ADA? So thanks to the ADA, I can. We're looking for your submissions. So keep them coming. Visit our website for more information on GTIndependence.com. So without further ado, here's the episode.

Tony Coelho:

My high school superintendent was like a father to me. I wasn't that close to my father. He was like a father to me, and he said to me, he said, "you got to get out of here. You got to go to Los Angeles or travel. You got to get away from a little small town, 3,000 people. And he said, you got to get out of here." So I went to Loyola University in Los Angeles, now Loyola Marymount University. So I go there, and I'm this country bumpkin who, I wasn't even—

Michael Murray:

That is really hard to envision.

Tony Coelho:

Everybody there was from private schools, and they were all, a lot of them were Jesuit schools and so forth. So I go there and in classes, they would be talking about this book or this author, never heard of the book or the author. And so I would make notes and then quickly go to the library and find out who this was and so forth. It was exciting and fun, but it was oh my God, I didn't think I could do it.

Holly Carmichael:

A whole different world.

Tony Coelho:

But I did very well. So at the end of my freshman year, they wanted me to run for sophomore class president. And so I did and won. And I beat the candidate from the elite schools, and the campus crowd wanted to see it. So everybody was all excited. Then I became social chairman. Then I became student body president. And I was student body president in high school too. But the point is I really felt accepted, felt part of it. I was just excited because I'd have my seizures, nobody cared. And so anyhow, it was all great.

And then Kennedy got assassinated and it was '63 and I graduated in June of '64. So this was in my senior year, and it hit me really hard. It just hit me like a ton of bricks. And I didn't shave, bathe for several days. I just was really into it. As a result of that, I said that I'm not going to pursue being a trial lawyer, that I'm going to try to do something public service wise, to do what Kennedy did and so forth. So I'm thinking, thinking, thinking. And ultimately, I decide what I really want to do, I want to become a Catholic priest. I want to become a Jesuit. I love the Jesuits. They're the scholars of the church and just really left, real right.

So I basically announced that I'm going to go into seminary. And I always say to the shock of my girlfriend of five years and my fraternity brothers knew better, that I was a very active frat man. And so I announced, and it was a big thing. Jesuits getting somebody as student body president and good grades and so forth and so on. And so that's what I was going to do.

I graduated outstanding senior, blah, blah, blah. And then I've got to get my medical exam. So I go to the doctor, Dr. John Doyle, Sr. in Los Angeles. And he does all the tests and so forth. He says, "well, have you ever heard the word epilepsy?" And I said, no. He said, "that's what you have."

Michael Murray:

That was the first time.

Tony Coelho:

First time. So he then tells me what it is and so forth. So I tell him what my family's put me through. And he then explains the stigma and what my family was going through and what I was going through. And he puts it all together.

And he says, well, I have some good news and bad news. The good news is, this is 1964. Says, the good news is you're 4F in military jargon, and that means you can't serve in the military. So you're 4F. So that's the good news. Vietnam, 1964. So that was the good news. He said, the bad news is is that the Catholic Church adopted in 400 AD can law that says if you have epilepsy or possessed by the devil, you cannot be a priest.

Now I was thrilled in one way, thrilled in that I knew what it was because I was having these spells and not knowing what the heck it was. So I was thrilled that now I knew what it was. And the Jesuits were saying to me, look, you could become a brother, a Jesuit brother. You're not a priest, but you can really do things and so forth. Now I knew what a brother was. Means that you don't get to do much.

Holly Carmichael:

Yeah, yeah.

Michael Murray:

Right.

Tony Coelho:

And they said, well, we're working on trying to get it changed, and we can work on getting it changed. And so join us. Said, no, I'm not interested in doing that.

Michael Murray:

I wonder if we can skip forward in your story a little bit just for a moment. But talk a little bit about your meeting with the Pope because I think that that has played so much into your ministry, and it has led to a substantial change.

Tony Coelho:

So I get elected to become household majority whip. And with that—

Michael Murray:

For our listeners who might not know what a whip is, can you explain it?

Tony Coelho:

The whip is a British term. "Whipper-in" is what it was. And it was the dogs and the horsemen who went out. And they whipped to get the dogs to do the things they're supposed to do. So the Brits came up with the term whip because what you're doing is you're whipping folks to get the votes that you need to have. So it's a British term. And so the House, of course, our government, British-based, we took that

title. And so it's in the House of Representatives, it's the speaker, it's then the majority leader, and then it's the whip and the power structure in in each of the parties. So I'm now elected majority whip. And with that, you get to go to three different countries, take a delegation. I'm not sure what they do today. I know they do some but not as much as we did before. But you go to three countries. So obviously, my first choice is Portugal.

Holly Carmichael:

Yeah, yeah.

Tony Coelho:

Yeah. Because I'm not that bad. I know it's going to be red carpet, the first highest ranking Portuguese-American in the history of the country and so forth. There's a state dinner, and they're going to do all these wonderful things. And I'm going to take my friends with me because you could take a delegation. And that would be great, right? So that's what I want to do.

And then the state Department gets to pick the second country. The second country was Morocco to meet with the king because the Portuguese and the Moroccans were working on some things for the Middle East and I was to transfer some stuff. So I should *[inaudible 00:09:49]*, I've never met a king so this might be fun.

So I say that I want to go to the Vatican and that I want to meet the Pope. I just don't want to do the Vatican. I want to meet the Pope. And so we go to fly into the Vatican. That's the first stop because that's the only day the Pope could meet with me. So we land in Vatican which is a country, by the way. And we land there. We go to the to the Vatican, and we're in this room. And the Pope walks in, and we all stand up, of course. And he sits down, we sit down, and now it's up to me. So I have to go to the podium and speak.

Now I have a philosophy that whenever you get a podium, it doesn't have to be a wooden thing or steel thing. Whenever you get an opportunity that you are speaking everybody else is listening, that's a podium in my view. Whenever you get to a podium, you got to say the truth. Right? So I read this very boring speech that the State Department and the Vatican has approved. I go through reading it, and it's an awful speech. So I go through it. I get through with it. And I say, "Your Holiness, I could not live with myself if I didn't say something personal." Quiet in the room, everybody's quiet.

Michael Murray:

Because everybody knows you're not supposed to say this.

Tony Coelho:

You're not supposed to do this. And the minions, his minions around the room, go, [mumbling]. My delegation is looking up at me like, oh no, here he goes. Just he's crazy. Here he goes. And Phyllis, my wife at the time is in shock because she knows what I could do. So she's kind of like "this is the Pope. Like be careful." So I say, "Your Holiness, I could not live with myself if I didn't say something personal."

And I said, “as a young man, I decided I wanted to become a Catholic priest. I was denied entry because in 400 AD, the Catholic Church adopted a canon law that said that if you have epilepsy, you're possessed by the devil, you can't be a priest. I think that's very unchristian of our church, and I wish you'd look into it.” And so I sit down.

He then speaks, and he reads the very boring speech with no comments. Just reads a very boring speech. So then we take a bunch of pictures, and when we get through, he gets up. Phyllis and I walk him to the door. He's holding her hand, and we get to the door. He turns and blesses her. He turns to me, does not bless me. And he says, “young man, I heard your comments” and turns around and walks away.

Now as a Catholic, the Pope not blessing you tells you in my view you're going straight to hell. That's not a good thing.

Holly Carmichael:

Oh wow.

Tony Coelho:

But it is what it is. I spoke what I felt, and that I felt good about. And I hope I didn't offend him. But that's the way it is. Two years later, I hear that canon law has been changed to permit individuals with epilepsy to become priests. Now I don't know when that happened because nobody ever told me.

Holly Carmichael:

Yeah.

Michael Murray:

For sure.

Tony Coelho:

But I found out about it two years later. Exciting. Whether I did or did not have an impact, I know what I did, and I know that he heard.

Holly Carmichael:

Yeah.

Tony Coelho:

According to him, he heard. But what it symbolizes in my view is that I always believe that you should speak up to power.

Michael Murray:

Thank you for joining part two of this three-part mini episode with Tony Coelho. We're releasing a new episode every Tuesday in February, and then on 2-22-22, we're going to cap it all off with this incredible

deep dive into the ADA with Tony. So don't forget to enter yourself into the I Can Campaign. Tell us what has the ADA meant to you? So for more information, head to our website at GTindependence.com. We look forward to you joining us again for this three-part series. And again, thank you for being a part of the Disability Garrison.

RECORDING ENDS