
Participants:

Holly Carmichael
Michael Murray
Tony Coelho



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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.

Welcome to this special episode of the Disability Garrison Podcast. We're so excited for this third mini episode with Tony Coelho. If you missed the first two, we really encourage you to go back and listen to them. You won't regret it. It's really just an incredible conversation with a general in the disability rights movement. We've covered so many impactful topics, and we just really encourage you to go listen to those.

Before we go any further, we do want to give everybody a little bit of a warning for this episode. Tony's going to be discussing his experience with suicidal thoughts. With everything going on in this world, we know it can be a hard subject to listen to, but we also think it's a really important subject to talk about and ensure that there's no shame as we address this issue. But we also know that it can be a trigger for some. So we want to give you that forewarning. So please take care of yourself as you listen to this episode.

Also, the I Can Campaign on Facebook has been incredible. We've gotten so many awesome submissions from people just like you, our listeners, telling us what has the ADA meant to you and what impact has it had on American life. We're still doing that campaign. We want you to get out there. We want you to tell us more about how the ADA has had an impact, and we want to keep hearing from you. So please go to GTindependence.com for further information. So let's jump into our conversation.

Tony Coelho:

I've graduated. I'm in the fraternity house, and I have a car and so forth. And I call my parents and I say, "I'm excited. I know what my problem is. I have epilepsy." And my mom and dad are on the line. "No son of ours has epilepsy."

Michael Murray:

Wow.

Tony Coelho:

Period. And I said, "well, this son does." I'm not going to take their word over the doctors. I said, "this son does." "Well, you need to come home because you're down there with a bunch of crazy people, and you need to get home" and so forth. I said, "I'm not coming home." And that stigma, which I talk a lot about, destroyed my relationship with my family.

Holly Carmichael:

Yeah.

Tony Coelho:

And it was superficial from that point forward, and a lot of hurts and so forth going through this. So then I said, okay, I'm excited that I know what it is, and they don't accept it. That's fine. So I start calling about these job interviews that I needed to do, and I fill out the paper. And there was one word on every one of these applications. And it's epilepsy. And I marked it, and I never got an interview, not one.

Michael Murray:

Wow.

Tony Coelho:

And it was turned down and turned down. And at first, it didn't bother me.

Michael Murray:

Class president. Great grades. I mean everything, fraternity, extracurricular activities, and zero callbacks.

Tony Coelho:

Nothing. Zero. And I start at first, that's the way it is, not a big deal. But then they kept coming negative, and I realized that it was all because of my epilepsy. So I was starting to drink, and I drank a lot. I was drunk by two o'clock in the afternoon. I always went to a hill in Griffith Park in Los Angeles, the same hill in Griffith Park. And I'd go there to get drunk.

And the day that I was going to do the dirty deed, I heard a merry-go-round. There was a merry-go-round at the bottom of the hill, which I'd never heard before because when you're drunk. But anyhow. And I heard a voice, and a voice said to me, "you're going to be just like those little kids. You're never going to let anybody or anything stop you from doing what you want to do."

Michael Murray:

Wow.

Tony Coelho:

That changed my life. I immediately—

Michael Murray:

Say that again.

Tony Coelho:

The voice said, “you're going to be just like those little kids getting on and off the merry-go-round. You're never going to let anybody or anything stop you from doing what you want to do.” And it was like a load went off of me, and I got my mojo back. I felt good. I believe that was the case.

Within the week, a priest friend of mine, Father Ed Markey wants to see me. And so I go to him, and he says, “I have an opportunity for you to live with Bob Hope and his family.” And Mr. and Mrs. Hope were fabulous. Mrs. Hope was Catholic mother of the year several times, and he was Episcopalian. And he promised her that he would convert before he died. So on his death bed, he converted.

Michael Murray:

That's funny.

Tony Coelho:

So I would go with him different places and so forth and so on. And one day, I remember him, we're in the car and he was driving. And he says, “Tony, look out, look out, look as far as you can see.” And we're on one of the freeways. And so I'm looking out. And he says, “I could have owned all that, and I turned it down. I could have owned all that.” Now he was one of the largest property owners in California, but he was upset he didn't own more.

And so one day, he says to me, he says, “you think you have a ministry and you're struggling because you think it only can be practiced in a church. A true ministry is practice in sports, entertainment, business, government. But you belong in politics.”

Michael Murray:

I want to draw out something that I've seen you do for me and for countless others. And now hearing this story helps me understand a little bit more about where that came from. But it's you have a God-given ability to call out the identity inside of others. You see something about them, and you draw it out of them and then help them understand this part of themselves and be able to pursue that in a way that they otherwise wouldn't because nobody had ever said and shown them that part of themselves and helped them understand that that was part of their identity. And hearing where it sounds like you learned that and then having watched you for years do that to so many and for myself. And I hope that one thing that

we can all take away from this to all our listeners but also for me as well, I want to keep doing that. I want to be better at that, of seeing the great things that people offer to the world, drawing that out, helping them see it, and then giving them the opportunity to pursue that with the means that I have.

Tony Coelho:

Well, in regards to what you just said, Michael, I believe that I have a ministry, and I think a true ministry isn't necessarily practiced in the church.

Michael Murray:

Right.

Tony Coelho:

I think it's a willingness to expose who you are and to help others. And the more you relate to who you are, the more you can help others. And so I have no hidden agendas. I mean I'm open about my epilepsy, I'm open about being gay, I'm open about everything. If you can accept all that, you can help others.

I always say that the hardest thing I've had in my life, the toughest decision in my life was not to commit suicide, to in effect face the devil and say no. That was the hardest thing I had to do. Everything else that I've done, leaving Congress, coming out of the closet, and telling my wife that I was gay and so forth, none of those were as difficult as saying no to the devil. And I really truly believe that there was a reason why I didn't become a priest, and there's a reason, one of the biggest reasons is that I was set up in effect to be able to do the ADA. And that is the biggest ministry anybody could have. Right?

Holly Carmichael:

Absolutely.

Tony Coelho:

But I really believe that there's a reason for what I'm doing.

Michael Murray:

Tony, your dear friend, Bob Dole had such a huge impact on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And I don't know that everyone fully understands the impact, and I'd love for you just to share a little bit of your perspective on that.

Tony Coelho:

Well, Bob was a Republican leader in the Senate. And as a leader with disability that he was proud of, I mean he showed it all the time. He had a pen in his hand so that people wouldn't reach out to try to shake that hand. So it was something that he lived with, and it was part of him. But as the leader with a disability in advocating for the ADA, it gave us a lot of credibility. You can be a brother of or a parent of, whatever, and it doesn't have the same impact. And particularly when you're in leadership which he was the head of it for the Republican Party, it gave the ADA a great push, a boost because people would say, well, if Bob

wants it, it must be important. And so in going through the Senate, we had Orrin Hatch, we had Tom Harkin, we had Ted Kennedy. So that combination was tremendous.

But Bob Dole being the Republican leader said something to the Republican Party. And as a matter of fact, with Bob Dole, Ted Kennedy, and Tom Harkin, the Democrats had a message as well but a different point of view because it's a relationship that they had with disability. Now Orrin Hatch on the Republican side, he still is a member of the Mormon Church. And he said, when I testified there, he said, I want to help you because in our church, people with disabilities are considered angels of God. And so he was aggressively involved, and that helped us in that community.

But Bob, I'll go back to that, as the leader of the Republican Party with a disability, gave us a tremendous amount of influence. Now he was very interested in making it happen. After it was adopted by the House, it then went to the Senate. And Bob would check in all the time to make sure that it was progressing. Steny Hoyer was leading the effort in the House, and he would check in with Steny if there's anything he could do and so forth. And I was out of Congress at the time. And he and I talked all the time about is there something I should do or he would say, I want you to do X. But he was the epitome of what the ADA is all about. But that leadership position, he was willing to use it to get the ADA done.

Michael Murray:

I love it.

Holly Carmichael:

I think it helps shape too that this isn't just a one party issue. Disability affects everyone, and I think you're right. Him being in Republican leadership was really critical to demonstrate that.

Tony Coelho:

Yeah. And there were some members of the Senate, conservative members who criticized Orrin Hatch for being supportive. But having Orrin Hatch as one of the leaders in the conservative movement supporting Bob Dole, they were very close friends, supporting Bob Dole and supporting our community also took away some of the negatives. Now the House was much different because I put in the bill. I have a disability. But Steny, his wife had a disability, and there were others. Stenson Brenter, his wife had a disability as well. But others had neighbors or children or whatever. Different again in that it isn't somebody with a disability. Hoyer was extremely well respected or is extremely well respected and that helps a lot. And the Republican lead for the ADA at the time was Steve Bartlett from Texas, and he had a lot of credibility as well. But Bob, I go back to that, being the Republican leader in the Senate with a disability was tremendously, tremendously impactful.

Michael Murray:

And our heart goes out to the friends and family and to you because I know him passing away is a loss to the country. But the impact that he had will not be forgotten, and we're going to make sure through the Disability Garrison that that impact is heard. And thank you for sharing those insights into your friend.

Tony Coelho:

Besides all that that he did, he was a great friend. He knew how to be a friend. He knew how to be helpful. So that's the total Bob Dole that I knew. And so to the very end of his life, we communicated, and he was concerned about me as opposed to me being concerned about him, which I was. But that isn't what he was interested in. Just a wonderful, wonderful human being.

Michael Murray:

Thank you for joining us for the third mini episode with Tony Coelho. We have been releasing a mini episode for the past two weeks, and this is our third episode in February. The next one that we're going to be releasing is on 2-22-22, and it's going to cap it all off with this awesome deep dive into the Americans with Disabilities Act with Tony. In the meantime, don't forget to go check out the I Can Campaign. For more information, go to gtindependence.com. And that will be wrapping up our month of diving into the ADA with Tony Coelho. Again, thank you for being a part of the Disability Garrison.

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