

# Michael S. Long

## A Bit About My Story

Though I was born disabled, I always knew I could live a life like anybody else. My parents had raised me that way, and I believed it. The first thing that drove me to prove this to the rest of the world happened in second grade. I'd gone to school that morning excited to ask my crush to marry me. I got dressed in my suit, with a bouquet of flowers and a cheap tin, toy-machine ring in my hand, and ran out the door. I went right to her on the playground, said hello, and made my intentions known. She did not respond as I'd hoped.

Back in the classroom, my teacher pulled me aside and said she needed to speak to me. What she'd said that day, at the time, made me feel like a weirdo. I immediately realized I was seen as different. It made me feel terrible and alone. She said, "Michael, your IQ is too low, and you're too mentally retarded. You'll never get married in your life." It became a defining moment for me. It's what made me want to prove my teacher and everybody else wrong.

It turns out, I did end up with a life like anybody else, despite my disability. I did fall in love and get married, just not to my grade school crush. I bought a nice house. I had an important job. I was a founder of the group, People First and set up chapters in the state of California, and abroad. Because I couldn't drive to do my work around the state, I arranged rides with a delivery truck driver. Later, I became the first disabled person to be hired by a state government when I was appointed Consumer Coordinator at the Department of Developmental Services by Governor Pete Wilson.

I always worked hard and I always found a way. My whole life, when someone told me I couldn't do something, I did it anyway. I began speaking on my experience and the importance of inclusion, and that's when I found my true calling. I was living the American Dream.

Sadly, I was so much like anybody else, I also fell into the same traps. I became a workaholic. I failed to communicate in my marriage. You see, my wife had Epilepsy, so childbirth was very dangerous and even life-threatening for her. But we never discussed this, even though she knew I'd wanted a family, until three years into our marriage. This led to more problems for us, which led to me being unfaithful, which led to our eventual divorce. Yes, I had a life like anybody else. The good and the bad.

I made other mistakes, financial and personal. Some people in my life thought these happened because I was disabled; that I was naive. But I learned from these mistakes. I was able to see that these misfortunes didn't happen to me because I was disabled, but because these are things that can happen to anybody.

I am living proof that disabilities don't mean you can't achieve your dreams, and be a productive member of society. I want to spread that knowledge to educate and motivate others.