

His biggest disability: ridicule of others

By Sharon Greengold
Daily Bulletin 3050

RANCHO CUCAMONGA — Michael Long met with Musser Middle School students Wednesday morning and told them the facts of his life:

"I was born as a breech baby, butt first," he said, inspiring some giggles.

Then the story turned serious. "The umbilical cord was wrapped around my throat and I lost a lot of oxygen."

The deprivation of oxygen caused him brain damage and the brain damage led to social rejection in school.

"There were 13 years of school and I didn't enjoy 12½ of them because people were calling me 'retard.'"

In his middle years now, Long is employed by the state Department of Developmental Disabilities, lecturing at schools and service clubs about how disabled people like to be treated.

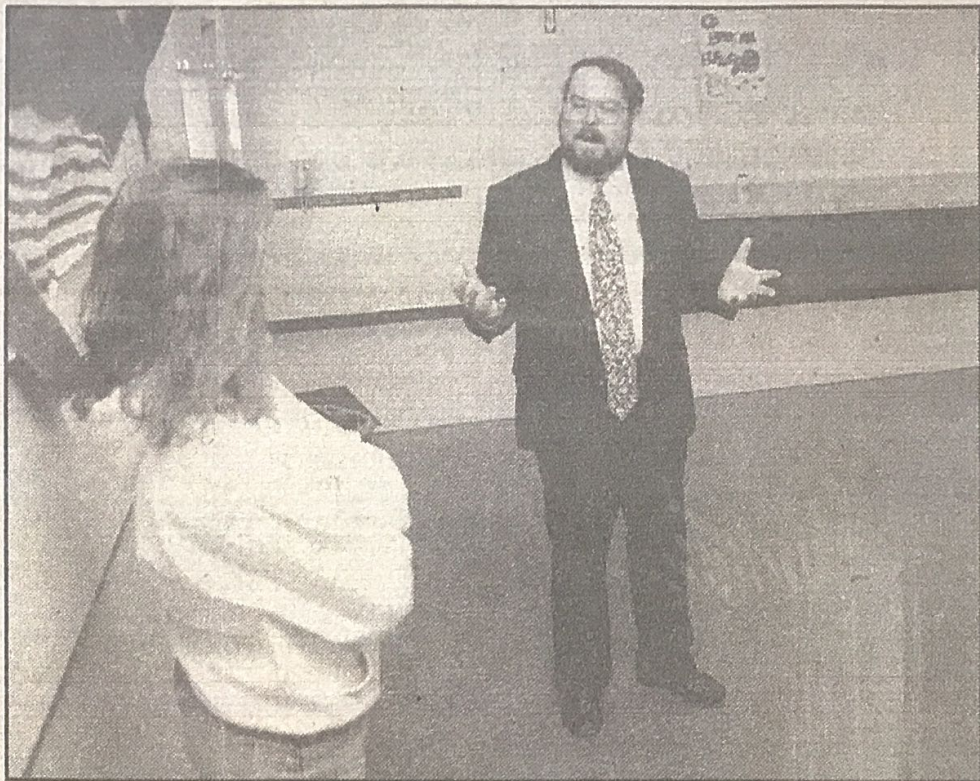
His voice is loud and his message direct. "We are not retards," he said. "We are people just like you."

Long suffers from what he describes as "a mild form of cerebral palsy and mental retardation."

There seems to be nothing wrong, however, with his memory. Long was a child of 7 when he first proposed marriage. His intended was a pretty little second-grade classmate who accepted his offering of a flower but never answered the question.

Long remembers just as vividly his teacher's reproof. She sat him down and asked if he was aware that he would need a job and an income in order to sustain a marriage. "She said, 'You're too mentally retarded to get married.'"

The teacher's dismissiveness set the tone for what he described as his period of self-doubt. His anxieties were reinforced continually. In eighth grade, a girl at his junior high



Jeff Malet/Daily Bulletin

Michael Long, who is developmentally disabled, speaks with a student at Musser Middle School in Rancho Cucamonga.

school verbally ridiculed and then proceeded to tackle him.

"It was really embarrassing to be beat up by the opposite sex," he said.

"But I hanged in there."

Finally, during the last semester of his senior year in high school, Long began to receive a shred of respect from his peers. He remembers students emphatically applauded him when he stood up to receive his diploma.

After graduation, Long received public assistance while he volunteered his time for the Department of Developmental

Disabilities. He found his forte in public relations.

And the department hired him.

"I'm a taxpayer citizen," Long said, "and I'm really excited about it."

During the question-and-answer session, Musser schoolchildren asked Long whether he had dates in high school and whether he had ever married.

"I'm happy now," he said. "In July I settled down and got married." He said he did not regret not having dated in high school.