

# Michael Long, international diplomat

Red Bluff High graduate taking message to Austria

By SARAH BARDWELL

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Michael Long is on top of the world. A state civil servant and member of the directing board of the renowned National Institute of the Severely Handicapped (NISH), Long grew up a Tehama County farm boy with a dream to travel. Now, he's headed for Europe.

Vienna, to be exact.

To the point, Dairyville native and Red Bluff High School graduate Michael Long has been asked to speak in front of the Viennese congress in a quest to help the Austrian developmentally disabled population gain more independence.

"He's an international diplomat," said Paul Verke, a public information officer with the state Department of Developmental Services. "He will be greeted by the governor when he arrives in Austria, which speaks for his reputation.

"We are all very excited for him," Verke said.

On Monday, Nov. 13, the lad who wanted to travel so much he became equipment manager for the Chico State football team will traverse the seas to destination Austria. Sponsored by the Austrian magazine "Domino," Long will voyage in the hopes of helping to build there the equivalent of what is the Disabled Act here.

"I am overwhelmed," said Long. "All my life, I have been working hard to prove to society that people with developmental disabilities can be successful."

"I am being rewarded because of the commitment and interaction I've had with peers — by giving so much. It's the philosophy of the more you give, the more you receive. But I have received way more beyond what is necessary with going over there."

Austria seems to be the culmination of Long's career — the highest loop so far in a roller coaster ransacked with twists. Born with a self-described mild case of cerebral palsy, Long had a hard time with school, and said his father became a member of the Lassen View Elementary School board simply to "protect his education."

In 1981, Long graduated from Red Bluff High. He worked on a farm, moved to the Bay area to "live in the big city" and "rub elbows with the Super Bowl champs," and then returned to Chico in 1986 where he really found himself.

"I found myself in the sense that I was accepting who I was and moving on," said Long. "I wanted to create a career opportunity for myself

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Daily News photo by Sarah Bardwell

Michael Long stands with arms open to the world, ready for a trip that will take him overseas to the European nation of Austria, where he will convey the same messages he has been sending his own country for the last several years.

## Michael Long

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Long said he received independent living skills through a Nor-Cal agency training him to "mow lawns. But I was bull-headed and stubborn. I did what I wanted to do."

What he did was become the equipment manager for Chico State, traveling with the football, basketball and baseball teams. What he did was help plan, and then speak at, the 1987 meeting of the People First Conference. What he did

was touch people.

"It's about recognizing people as people first, and as disabled second," said Long. "It's self-advocacy — to empower yourself."

"Hugged and mugged" by the crowd after his first speech ever, Long said he realized he had found his own niche — talking about his life to students in the morning and spending his afternoons with the teams.

Long didn't quit his job as a travelin' man until he got the chance to participate in "a real Martin Luther King dream."

Helping integrate the developmentally disabled into a fitness club in Chico, Long had the perfect "educational opportunity for the members to interact with the disabled," which they did for the next 10 years.

Another higher loop was added to the coaster when Long was appointed by former Gov. Pete Wilson to be the consumers coordinator for the Department of Developmental Services, a position that turned civil service toward the end of Wilson's term. Through the position, Long spends much of his time edu-

cating the public on issues surrounding people with disabilities.

"I was appointed to my job on April 9, 1992, at 8 a.m.," said Long with a smile. "I remember the walk into the office, up the elevator and into the executive suite where I saw a big sign that said 'Welcome, Michael Long.' It was a big relief in the sense that I had made it. I was successful.

"But now the real work had begun. I've made mistakes, and I've learned from them and grown. But I've empowered a lot of people with develop-

mental disabilities."

Now, with 19 awards tucked into his pockets, his briefcase, and behind his smile, that is exactly what Long aims to do in Austria. For 10 days, amid his sightseeing trips, he will attend press conferences, he will conduct workshops for supporters, and he will hold symposiums. He will speak to Congress.

He will tell Austria what he has been telling the United States for years. He will speak about People First, he will speak about himself, and he will speak about how

much he owes to his wife of almost eight years, Hallie. He will tell people from an insider's point of view what it is like to reach for independence. And he will tell it with a smile.

"This is a highly incredible opportunity," said Long. "Back in kindergarten, would I ever have thought I would be able to accomplish this? I am speaking in front of a foreign nation's Congress. It is so far-fetched, but I am grateful.

"I've figured out now that I don't need to prove anything else to myself or to others. It's time to be able to relax."