

EMPLOYEE OF THE WEEK

Michael Long Has Proven Critics Wrong All of His Life

-- by Mickey Marchello --

Awards and trophies mean different things to different people.

Take Michael Scott Long, for example. In October, he was awarded the 1995 Governor's Trophy from the California Governor's Committee for Employment of Disabled Persons.

Each side of the four-sided clear glass trophy holds a clear meaning for Long.

"The left side represents all the pain that I went through in schools, all the name-calling and all the crap I put up with in mainstream institutions," said Long, a 33-year-old coordinator of consumer affairs with the state Department of Developmental Services.

"The back side is for all the hard work I've done. From 1986-92, I was living off of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and the welfare system," said Long, who was a breech delivery baby and grew up with a minor developmental disability.

"The right side represents 1992-96 for all the work and (trying to) make a difference in today's society," he said, "and the front is for the acknowledgment the governor gave me in honoring me.

"That's what (the trophy) symbolizes to me," Long said.

If health professionals had their way when Long was an infant, he'd be institutionalized instead of living his own life and helping other disabled people stand up for their rights.

When he was born in Red Bluff, feet first and his umbilical cord briefly cutting off the oxygen flow to his brain, doctors diagnosed Long with a minor cerebral palsy/mental retardation condition.

"Doctors warned my parents I may not walk or talk because of the lack of oxygen," Long said.

But his parents, especially his father, were determined to not send young Michael into an institution. "They brought me home and put me through speech and physical therapy," he said, and pushed for him to go through the public school system.

He was growing up as a typical toddler. "I always stole the cookies and milk in kindergarten," he said, laughing, but by early in elementary school he started to realize something.

"I knew at the second grade there was something different with me," he said.

In the first grade, he had trouble learning the alphabet and the number system. A school psychologist was brought in to test Long and to set up a support system for the teacher to help him.

Unfortunately, the medical and scholastic community's way of handling developmental disabilities in children differed vastly from the way they are handled today.

"The psychologist always set up barriers between me and my peers," criticizes Long. "Why am I going through this?" Long would continually ask his psychologist.

Long's father ran for the local school board to make sure Michael would have the same opportunity scholastically as everybody else.

But his second grade teacher nearly shut the door on Michael Long's dreams and aspirations.

"I wanted to experience marriage," he said as a second-grader. He snuck out of the house, made his way to school, grabbed a ring and flowers and "proposed" to a classmate, Heather.

"My teacher found out what happened and told me that money was the most im-

portant thing for marriage, that you need money to support yourself," Long said. "She told me, 'your IQ is too low, you're mentally retarded and you'll never get married in your life.'"

His father advocated keeping Michael in regular schools and not sending him to segregated schools. He graduated from the eighth grade and his counselor asked if he would like to continue on in public school or a special school.

Because Red Bluff High School was one of the first schools to implement special education programs, Long elected to go on in the public school system.

"I thought I would be mainstreamed into other classes," he said. But the only classes the school deemed receptive were physical education classes. "That was the only course they felt I could fit in."

Long got involved in sports as team manager for the school varsity teams. But one day on a bus trip to another school, Long was tortured by the football players in the back of the bus. They held a lighter up close to Long's face and tried to suffocate him.

Long faults the educational system for problems developmentally disabled kids face in school. One is the mobile buildings often used by special education classes are separated from the rest of the campus. That, he said, sets up a labeling stigma for students attending special education classes.

At Red Bluff High School, however, the buildings were right in the center of the campus, helping students better assimilate with one another.

"I was really excited about mainstreaming right in the middle of the high school," Long said.

Another battle was when he was placed in a senior civics class with nine other students who failed the previous year. The students proposed and passed a motorcycle helmet bill in class, years before the real Legislature, putting together the arguments for and against and convincing fellow students of their arguments. Long got a B+ in the course.

"If you create a supportive environment and get national support, people with developmental disabilities can take general education classes," Long said.

He graduated with his class, the most important night of his life, but he didn't date and didn't get his driver's license until he was 22 years old.

Long was the first developmentally disabled student at Red Bluff High School and many more have followed, he said. One was a neighborhood girl with Downs Syndrome.

"She said, 'Michael Long graduated from Red Bluff High School. I can too,'" he said. "She made it. (Her graduation) was the second most important night in my life."

When he was about 25, he went on SSI and Social Security. It was during this period that Michael Long discovered many things about himself and set about building a new image system for himself.

"I learned about accepting myself," he said. "I'm fine, I'm human and I'm not Dumbo."

His mantra became "I can do things" and he moved to the Chico area. In 1987, he got involved with the state board dealing with developmental disabilities.

"I was able to adjust myself," Long said. "I found out I had public speaking skills." He began speaking to Rotary Clubs, schools and organizations about empowering the developmentally disabled.

In 1991, Long was told Governor Pete Wilson was looking to hire someone with a



Michael Scott Long

Title: Coordinator of Consumer Affairs
Department: Developmental Services
Years with the State: 4 years

developmental disability who was receiving services from the state.

Long applied for and got the position, where he currently works now.

The majority of his position involves public awareness, speaking to clubs, organizations, schools and groups about empowerment of developmentally disabled people.

The Governor's Trophy came about when Long's boss, Denny Amundson, director of the DDS, nominated him.

"It's time for new blood, it's time for society to recognize people with developmental disabilities can be a part of working, playing and living," Long said.

Long's father was tragically killed in 1991, before Long ascended into the state's employ and received the Governor's Trophy.

"Two days before (his death in a train collision), we had dinner and I said, 'I love you, I'll be seeing you soon.' He said, 'Mike, see you soon.'"

"God created an opportunity for me to say my final good-bye to him," he said.

As he's proved critics wrong all his life, he got married as well, in July 1993, to Hallie.