

interview with disability activist michael long

By Emily Bond

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Reflecting on his life and memoir
Conducted by Emily Bond

Michael Long was born with an intellectual disability and cerebral palsy. He's an education advocate for people with disabilities and recently his memoir, ***a life like anybody else: how a man with an intellectual disability fulfilled his american dream*** (<https://www.amazon.com/life-like-anybody-else-intellectual/dp/0999742299>), was re-edited and re-released. I spoke with Michael about the anniversary of the Americans with Disability Act, his book, and his life right now.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) marks its 31st anniversary this July 27th. The act officially became law in 1990. In 1992, Governor Pete Wilson hired disability awareness activist and speaker Michael Long in the role of a Consumer Coordinator at the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), making Michael the *first* person to be officially hired by the State of California with an intellectual disability.

The purpose of the ADA is to make sure people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. It's meant to provide a more equitable opportunity for individuals with disabilities. Did it impact you, Mike?

Oh yeah, it was a very big deal because of being able, well everything in the situation of being able to make us have the new buildings that could be accessible and being able to be a part of their community more because of it. One of the things that is difficult though. I know of a couple of places where I grew up in Red Bluff, California. They had to be able to close their business to make the ADA special requirements. And so the businesses had to close because they couldn't afford it. That's the weak part of the ADA — I think it's very unfair to be able to shut down a business. I think there should be some money through the government to be able to help the businesses to make them accessible.

It was the way the bill was written. But the ADA, it's really powerful with employment opportunities, because they can't discriminate against employment opportunities. Like one of the things, I can give you an example: I used to work for the Chico Sports Club, and the owner was an ex-linebacker for the San Francisco 49ers. And, when he opened up a health club, one of the things we did was hire seven people with developmental disabilities to be able to work there.

Do you remember when this was, and the owner's name?

Let's see. It would have been right after the ADA passed, so in the early '90s and his name is Jeff Stover. Heck of a guy. Really good guy. While I worked at Chico State as the equipment manager, I met Jeff, and one of the things he really liked was the idea of people working for him there with developmental disabilities, we got introduced, and boom when he bought out the health club he hired me! One of the things is that I really encouraged him to be able to hire the seven people. And it was really incredible because it lasted for several years – and the reason why it only lasted for that amount of time is he had to eventually cut back on staff.

But during those years a couple of them (the people with developmental disabilities who had been hired) got their driver's license. A couple of them lost 100 pounds because of the job they were assigned to or because of the access to the health center. Positive stuff. The owner of his office, where the building was when he spoke to his boss that ran the property in this situation – and so he was saying he couldn't not believe how successful and a great decision he made to be able to hire people with developmental disabilities. This was such a great big deal in Chico, CA and everyone loved it.

Do you think more could be done to help make the ADA effective?

Yeah, I think businesses need help from, funding to help with the rules from the ADA so they can hire people with disabilities and stay in business easier.

What did it mean to you to have a career? And one that specifically helped others?

To me. It meant being a part of a community. And that, that means a lot. It's a positive to be able to work. And the work I did I believe had an impact. I know it had an impact.

Why did you decide to have a memoir written?

I went to an international **people first** (<https://www.peoplefirstca.org>) conference and I met this gentleman, Karl Willams who is a writer and he asked me if I wanted to be able to write a book, and I said: "right on!" And so I was fortunate enough to be able to go back and speak at one of their conferences again, so I just added time on this stay after the conference to be interviewed by Karl. And he said that he wanted to be able to write the book in my own words. Because, because he thought it was important to not have his voice and what he thinks about my life. So I always wanted to write a book and the reason for that is to be able to have other people with developmental disabilities to empower themselves how to live a life, like how to live, where you can live, play and work in the community.

You talk often about empowering others to live a life in the community. And your story is about your life in the community and your experiences with the public school system.

One of the things, I think my parents wanted me to succeed like anybody else was because they were determined to raise me in an environment where you can be able to do anything. That you want to. And I think one of the reasons I was successful in the public school system was because my dad was on the school board. I think it was around 30 years, he always got voted in.

And so what kind of effect did it have on me to go through a public school system that was good and bad? The good is I would not be able to read if I didn't go and also I think that the good is that it made me be successful in my life. It gave me the empowerment to succeed and want to fight for myself and being able to make sure that I can be successful in my life. The bad part is, and I think everyone that, who would go through school with a developmental disability, the public school system – and I think anyone that goes through school with a developmental disability would experience the bad part. And that is a lot of harassment and bullying. And so, that had some effect on me, in believing in myself, even though I believe I empowered myself with the good too. The other good part is, that, it took a psychological toll being able to, being able to have problems like everybody else. But good, to have problems like everybody else.

It opens you up to the community. But from reading your book, it's funny to see how you talk about people you went to school with, even in elementary school and you notice their journey and growth too and how they became more empathetic. And you're right this is something that abled body people and people with disabilities all experience when they open themselves up to others. There's a risk of ridicule or something not going the way you want it to go. And I think your experience as a child left an emotional impact, being in the system with a general population but it also sounds like it gave you an enormous amount of empathy for other people as well. Can you talk about the friends that you made, and how you grew with them?:

I think one of things [regarding] why I was able to develop those friendships and grow with them is because, I think I wanted to have friendships with the people who bullied me, and harassed me, why I would want friendships with them is because I *grew* up with them. And so, one of the things that is important I think is trying to be able to be treated the way that you want to be treated. You don't get that way, until probably in high school or after high school. Where everyone experiences a little loneliness and frustration because of not having friends to socialize with and one of the things And why I wanted to have those friends, is because, especially the (Mike laughs) the females, the women, because I always had a crush on some of them, and wanting to be involved and have a relationship just like anybody else would that is nondisabled.

This experience was a shared one. And that you weren't put away, or hidden, you were a part of the community. And I think that is so interesting. That's such a universal feeling, especially for high schoolers. To be lonely, to have crushes, to have moments of kindness and not-so-great moments. I love that your book is written in your tone, and in your flow. And it really feels like you're having a conversation with someone. Do you have a favorite part of the book?

Yes, my favorite part, in fact, there are two favorite parts. One of them was one, I always stood by the P.E. door with Terri, she always would not go in until I was there. And that meant so much to me. And so one of the things is, is that we, got into a great big disagreement and we never talked for three years or so. And finally one day in my senior year and her junior year we reunited in the situation that, we, developed a great, great close friendship. One of the things I was so grateful about is that she married someone from my class. And so I always got to see her in class reunions.

And the other favorite part was when I met a person that — I was a track manager for my high school for the track team, and our bus broke down on the way home. And so one of the things is that the coaches said there was a bus from another high school, that goes farther than where I grew up and they could drop people off. And so one of the things that happened was they only let the

women of the track team be on that bus. And so I was the only gentleman that got to go because I said my sister, I forgot the exact words, but I said my sister had something and I needed to stay with her. And so I wanted to not wait on the other bus – and I used that as an excuse. And so one of the things that I did, everyone kind of booed and hissed on the other bus, because it was so jam-packed. And there was one seat where a woman said, “You can’t sit there!” And so across the way, there was this really incredible woman named Denise, that said you could sit here. And man, we started a big friendship. Denise even went to prom with me.

Do you still speak with Denise or Terri? Could we get them a copy of your book?

Ha, I would like to, but it might be hard! They both got married and I don’t know their new last names. But that would be fun!

Michael Long’s memoir is a detailed account of his life in California, from elementary school to his role as a disability awareness activist. *A Life Like Anybody Else: How a Man with an Intellectual Disability Fulfilled His American Dream* is a powerful story that calls for inclusion, education, and acceptance for all. It will inspire readers to achieve their goals, overcome obstacles, and highlight misperceptions surrounding people with disabilities. Mike’s goal is to not only provide his story as an example to others like him but more importantly to stress the need for first-person accounts of navigating the education system and then entering the workforce.

Praise for Michael’s Book:


“A book told in the voice of an individual with disabilities is a rarity. This book — so rich and full, so vivid and moving, so free of cliché, so bursting with hope — is a marvel.” — **Rachel Simon, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Riding the Bus with My Sister* and *The Story of Beautiful Girl***


“Michael Long tells the truth in this book. And the truth about what it means to be a human being is hard to come by.” — **Nancy R. Thaler, Deputy Secretary for the Office of Developmental Programs, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania**


You can find Mike’s book on **amazon** (<https://www.amazon.com/life-like-anybody-else-intellectual/dp/0999742299>).


– **emily bond** (<http://thebookendsreview.com/emily-bond/>)

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