



Tony Coelho: Lifelong Advocate for People with Disabilities

Description: A champion of rights for the disabled, Tony Coelho, Board Chair of the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), who authored, in part, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, carries on the fight for the rights of the disabled in today's issues. On this edition of Ringler Radio, host Larry Cohen and co-host Randy Dyer, talk to Tony about his lifelong advocacy, his personal story with epilepsy and how a structured settlement can assist those living with disabilities.

Host: Larry Cohen

Guest: Tony Coelho

Co-Host: Randy Dyer

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Larry Cohen: Well, hello everyone and welcome to Ringler Radio. I am Larry Cohen the head of Ringler Associates North East Operations. I am so glad you could join us again today.

Today on Ringler Radio, we are very pleased to have as our special guest a true champion for the disabled who will share with us his interesting and lifelong journey and tell us about the constant battle he has been waging for the disabled and will also let us know just how that fight is progressing.

But before we get to all that, let me introduce my co-host and colleague at Ringler, Randy Dyer for our Rockville Maryland Office. Randy recently came to Ringler after a stellar stint as the Executive Director of the National Structured Settlement Trade Association. In fact he currently serves on the NSSTA Board of Directors even to this day.

And we are certainly glad to have you at Ringler Randy and so welcome to Ringler Radio.

Randy Dyer: Thank you Larry. It's great to be here.

Larry: Well our special guest today is Tony Coelho. Tony is chair of the American Association of People with Disabilities and the past year of the board for The Epilepsy Foundation. And many of you will remember Tony as a former US Congressman for California who authored 'The Americans with Disabilities Act' and has dedicated his life to helping people living with disabilities.

Welcome to Ringler Radio Tony. We are certainly glad to have you.

Tony Coelho: Thank you very, very much Larry. It's great to be with you today.

Larry: Well, Tony you have a very interesting back story. And why don't you share with our listeners your personal story and how it led you to where you are today.

Tony: Right. I am from Central California, raised on a dairy farm and I had an accident on a pickup truck on the dairy farm, hit my head and about a year later, I started having seizures.

At the time my family didn't know what it was or actually wouldn't accept that they were seizures. They wouldn't accept epilepsy and so when told by the doctors it was epilepsy, they refused to accept it.

They went to other doctors and they were told again that it was epilepsy, and they refused to accept that. So then I finally went to witch doctors and during this whole time, my family never told me that it was epilepsy and I was 16, 17 years old.

They kept it away from me. I kept on milking cows and going to school and doing what you normally do as a 16, 17 year old but having these passing out spells like all of them. And finally after three witch doctors, I decided I wasn't going to do that anymore.

With the hocus pocus you go through for that, I didn't believe in and didn't want to and so I continued with the passing out spells with no medication or anything. But the family was taught that if you had epilepsy it meant you are possessed by the devil...and they believe that, and I was a joke at this point that my Republican friends know I am possessed by the devil, but to have your family believe that is a different thing.

So I went on. I did well in school and I was outstanding senior and student body president, went on to college, continued with the passing out spells and then I decided in 1964 to enter the Jesuit seminary, become a Catholic priest and doing that I had to take a physical...and the doctor, after the physical said, have you ever had passing out spells, or headaches, or whatever? And I said, oh yes, all the time, for at least five years...and he said will they ever tell you what you've been to a doctor, did they'd tell what it was? I said well, I have been to a lot of doctors, witch doctors and so forth.

I was never told what it was. It was pretty obvious what it is, the tests say that you have epilepsy and I'd never heard the word. So he described to me what it was and then he said tell me about the witch doctor, so I did...and he said well I can tell you what's going on here.

He said your family obviously doesn't believe in epilepsy and then he told me that culturally that a lot of different groups didn't believe in epilepsy and that the Catholic Church in 400 AD had established in Canon Law that if you had epilepsy or possessed by the Devil you couldn't be a priest and that did build up over the years that they were one and the same. And so he said, so that leads me to what I have to tell you. First off, it's 1964, you are 4-F, you don't have to serve in Vietnam. You will never serve in the military and bad news is that Canon Law says you can't be priest because you have epilepsy, so I can't let you into the Jesuit seminary.

So I was kicked out of the seminary and I felt good about it from the point of view that for the first time in five years I knew what my problem was medically, and so I would take a pill and it would hopefully control my seizures. Now I still have seizures to this day. I am 69. So I still

have seizures this day, but they are not as severe, and I then ended up having a good life after finding out what it was.

The problem was that I lost my driver's license because the doctor had to immediately tell the Department of Motor Vehicles that I had epilepsy so by law you immediately have your license taken away.

I lost my insurance. On every job application the word epilepsy was there and I'd check the box and all these people who were trying to get me to join them as an employee, because I was outstanding senior and student body President and great grades.

Now because I marked the box were no longer interested in me working for them. And my parents rejected my epilepsy and we ended up not having a relationship for 25 years. I started drinking heavily. I was drunk by three o'clock in the afternoon every day.

Larry: Is that when you considered Congress?

Tony: No...yes I should have. And then I became suicidal. And then one day I was at a... was actually a hill but in those days when I was drunk I thought it was a mountaintop, and the bottom of that hill was a merry-go-round. And I could hear these kids going off and on merry-go-round.

I could see them and something hit me that day and I said I want to be just like those little kids, and I was never going to ever let anything stop me from believing in myself and doing what I believed was right for me and so forth.

So from that day forward, I've never gone there again. I've never been depressed, suicidal. I turned myself around and I ended up going to work for Congressmen, became a Congressman, went to work at Wall Street, started several businesses.

Larry: No question about it, you've had a tremendous....

Randy: Tony, I have told you this story before. I remember the first time I met you. You were working for the Congressman from California. And I can't remember what the issue was, who I was there with. But we went to the Congressman, we talked to you.

We had a brief meeting, I went out in the hall and I turned to the guy next to me and I said that is a serious guy. You meet a lot of these staffers who sort of take themselves too seriously but this guy is going places.

Tony: Thank you.

Randy: And yes the next time I heard about you- you were your boss. So tell us a little bit about how you chose public service?

Tony: John Kennedy was my hero and I decided that if he could give up his life for public service, I was thinking about being a trial lawyer. That's what I was going to school for and I decided the last moment that I wanted to go in the priesthood and when I got rejected from that, then I lived with Bob Hope for a year. Bob Hope and his family were helping me come to terms with myself.

He suggested that if you think you have a ministry and you think it can only be practiced in a church, but a true ministry can be practiced in business, in entertainment, in sports, et cetera. But the one that can have the most impact, if really practiced well, is in politics. He said, "I don't mean working for the government, I mean in politics and you can pass laws, you can change people's lives." He said in the church, you can affect maybe a few hundred people or maybe a few thousand people. But actually, if you practice it carefully in politics, you can change thousands and millions of people's lives.

I've always given Bob Hope for my public service, my career in politics because as a result of authoring the ADA, it's now the law of the land. Not only in the United States, but it's the law of the land in 52 different countries. Millions of people's lives have changed because of Bob Hope's advice to me.

Larry: You know... that's a part of the story I don't think anybody ever knew, the influence of Bob Hope. That's quite fascinating. After you left Congress in 1989 and you had a successful stint on Wall Street. You also had several key positions; you held several key positions concerning the rights of the disabled in the Clinton Administration. Why don't you tell us a little bit about your work there and give us a peek at how the Clinton Administration dealt with the whole area, the important area, of disability?

Tony: Well, I was very close to the President and Hilary Clinton. He tried to get me to be a Chief of Staff, which I wouldn't do, although, it was one of the jobs that I really liked in government. But I wouldn't do it because I was still on Wall Street. I was making a lot of money, which I wanted to do for my family. Then he convinced me to become a chairman of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, which was basically, a group, an agency, where you're chair pro bono.

The agency that got started was a result of people coming back from the Korean War. Veterans coming back from the Korean War, and helping them find jobs... disabled vets to find jobs. Then eventually, it moved into helping all disabled folks find jobs, and so forth. So he asked me to do that, which I was happy to do. I ended up doing that for six years for him.

Then he asked me to be the Vice-Chair along with...actually, it was really an honor, eight cabinet officers for me to be the Vice-Chair of this commission along with the Secretary of Labor, was the chair of it. But it was for adults with disabilities to get jobs.

So I did that for two years. We ended up, as a result of that, creating the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Disability Policy. We also worked on starting the process to count the number of people with disabilities. How many were working, how many were not? How many people actually in the United States? So we started all of that. Then he appointed me as Co-Chair of the US Census Monitoring Board, which was a rather interesting task...then also, the commission to study the intelligence agencies.

Then one year to do the World's Fair in Portugal. I represented the United States as ambassador for a year. He had me do a lot of different things which I enjoyed. He was an amazing individual. He liked to sleep no more than four hours a night and he read everything you gave him. He was extremely involved what was going on because; he read and asked all kinds of questions. Loved public service, and loved making things happen.

Larry: He loved the give and take, didn't he? He loved the give and take of policy, too, didn't he?

Tony: He loved the give and take of policy and he loved politics. He felt it all went together. But, he was a listener. He loved to go at you when he thought you were wrong. He didn't mind taking you on. He liked to listen, he liked to learn. He would pick up the phone at 2:00 in the morning and call you and say, "Look, I'm reading your memo, and I don't agree with this," or "What in the hell did you mean by that?"

Larry: Yes, you wished he had a better clock.

[laughs]

Tony: Yes, or that he slept more.

Larry: Exactly. Randy?

Randy: You were the author of the AAPD of the American Disabilities Act, Tony. Can you tell us how that has changed the world?

Tony: Yes, people really don't understand. They think that it only helped those of us with disabilities. But, it's also changed the life of everybody. For example, you go out to any street corner and you'll see curb cuts. Those were put there for people with disabilities so that if you're confined to a wheelchair, you can get on or off the curbs. If you actually stand there and watch at a street corner, you'll see that more people without disabilities use those curb cuts than people with disabilities.

Larry: No question.

Tony: You'll see mothers and fathers with babies in baby carriages. You'll see the elderly use it to get off and on the curbs. You'll see that delivery men and women taking goods to the small businesses.

Larry: I use it for my briefcase when I roll it right off the sidewalk.

Tony: Yes. It's the same thing with business men and women taking their roller cases and so forth. You see it with young kids with roller blades, roller skates, roller whatever, using it, unfortunately. You see a lot of people using it. Same thing with voice volume controls on phones; they're for the hearing impaired. People use that in noisy places, and so forth.

But, in effect, what happens now is that before 1990, if you were in a wheelchair, you could legally get kicked out of a movie theater. If you were sight-impaired, you could legally get kicked out of a restaurant, because they didn't have time to tell you what they had or what was on a menu, or whatever.

Legally, a person could ask you about your disability or they could deny you work just by looking and see you had a disability, and just say look, we don't hire the disabled, period. That was legal. Now of course, all of that has changed. That has been a tremendous advancement.

As I said earlier, you now have basically, the ADA, the law of the land, and 52 different countries. The real basic thing is that those of us with disabilities have the right, the legal right, to go to court to make sure our civil rights are protected. Prior to July 1990, we had no right to go to court. No right at all.

Larry: Well, Tony, what would you say the biggest challenge for Americans with disabilities today is? You talked about a lot of those issues, what's really facing the disability community right now?

Tony: Without a doubt it's employment...it is the key to living independently in our society. If you have a job, you have the ability to take care of your family. You have pride and providing for yourself, providing for your family. It's what America's all about, and so forth.

I've told the last five presidents that those of us with disabilities are really the only group in America that wants to pay taxes. Because, if you're paying taxes, that means you have a job. So we want our job. While we've been taken care of in access and inclusion and protection of the law, the place that we still don't have the access that we really want, is employment.

The actual employment rates have dropped for Americans with Disabilities over the last 20 years. We're working hard now to get that changed because, we're more interested in working than getting a handout. We want to participate in society like anybody else. That's critically important to us.

Now, there are people with disabilities who can't work and we want to make sure that those people are taken care of as well but the great thing is that one of the things that Ringler has done is, has supported this aggressively in that over the years.

Larry: No question about it and I know that, both Randy and I know this very well that Ringler has been a big supporter, and rightfully so a big supporter of the American Association of People with Disabilities.

And one of the reasons for that is because I think the AAPD has recognized along the way that structured settlements are a wonderful way to help settle the cases for those folks with disabilities and help those people manage their financial futures very well.

We are going to talk about that and I want you to deal with that Tony after we come back from a break. So let us take a quick break right now and will be back in a minute with our fascinating special guest Tony Coelho right here in Ringler Radio! I'll be right back.

Larry: Welcome back to Ringler Radio, glad you could join us. My co-host today is Randy Dyer from our Rockville, Maryland Ringler Office. And of course we are joined by our special guest Tony Coelho, chair of the American Association of People with Disabilities and Past Chair of the Board for the Epilepsy Foundation.

And Tony I know you are very excited about the focus today AAPD now has on young people. Tell us about where you are going with this right now?

Tony: Well, I am particularly excited about what we've been able to do for young people. We are very aggressive in giving hope to young people that they can be very involved with, well American society in general and that they can participate just like anybody else.

We have a partnership, a new partnership with WalMart to expand our internship program to students with all types of disabilities, to come to Washington and intern with the Congress Federal Agencies and all kinds of national organizations.

We are also starting a national scholarship fund for young people to complete their education, get internships and jobs and pursue dreams.

We've just gotten approval of doing a scholarship for young people with disabilities who are interested in law school and who then want to commit five years after law school to the Disability movement. And that is going to be something that we just got approved which will be announcing sometime within the next few months.

Larry: You are really the go to organization in the disability community it seems, is that...

Tony: Right now we are, and we are really, really excited about that because we want to be able to increase the influence of people with disabilities on Capitol Hill and the administration and so forth. We got President Obama to do a public service ad, first time in our community that one has been done by the President regarding the 20th anniversary of the ADA, we've had the effort to get that done.

We are also very involved in getting the passage of the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, which is just like the ADA, but focus primarily on people who are sight and hearing impaired...but this is the accessibility standards for television and radio for digital and online content. So some very, very exciting things...

Randy: That is only when the structured settlement industry has on occasion gone to war for catastrophically injured people who were their clients. AAPD has been absolutely our most important ally. Can you talk a little bit about that relationship?

Tony: Well, I can because what people don't understand is that structured settlement in my view, I have always said is a moral benefit. It is for those recovering from an accident, a structured settlement offers guaranteed payments with no reductions if you go back to work. In contrast, government benefit programs reduce the payments if you go back to work which in effect is a disincentive for a lot of people to go back to work or even look for a job.

So what happens with structured settlement is that you get the benefit of the settlement and then you can go back to work and you benefit from all that. So I am a big advocate of structured settlements and I've said so for many, many years.

Larry: Well, we appreciate that and as Randy said, we've been arm in arm in many of those fights on Capitol Hill to make sure the tax free status of this product remains in place. And we want to thank you for that.

As we wrap up now though Tony, how can our listeners learn more about your organization. Where do they find you, how do they get to you and especially in new media age?

Well on this new media age, it's easy to find us at aapd.com or the epilepsyfoundation.org. AAPD runs a national eNews listserv and blog on disability issues called Justice for All, which you can join for free at aapd.com or on our Facebook and Twitter @aapd. That way can follow everything that's happening with Americans with disabilities.

And the best way to support AAPD is by becoming a member of ours and letting your voice be heard. So become a member and visit our website and we do love to have you.

Larry: Well I think that's great advice. And for all the listeners out there, please go to that website. It's a good one and I think you'll be fascinated with what you find there.

And of course you should also go to ringlerassociates.com which is another good website where you can find Randy Dyer's name and any of the other Ringler brokers that can help you resolve the cases that you are involved with.

I want you to know that all the Ringler Radio shows including this one can be found on ringlerassociates.com and also on the legaltalknetwork.com. So please take advantage of that. You can download them to your iPod, listen to them at your desk, whatever makes sense for you in your busy world.

So Tony I want to thank you once again for being our guest. It is fabulous to have you on here. Thank you very much.

Tony: Randy and Larry, thank you very much. I appreciate it. It's quite an honor to be on your program.

Larry: Great. Randy again, thanks for co-hosting and we'll see you soon. So everyone else, go out there and have a great day!

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