

About the Author: Living in California

When I was a little child
All my dreams were running wild
I had the whole world at my feet
Was never hurt, I let my actions speak

I never doubted . . . that I would find it in myself to be
Now I'm gonna shout it
Let the whole world sing it along with me
You can be who you wanna be

So don't stop ever believing, keep on dreaming
Got to be strong and take the fall
Hold on to the feeling, the path we're leaving
This is your chance to take it all

In the moment it all sounds
Tears of joy will drown the crowd
Feel my heart just beating fast
This is how it feels to live and laugh

Lyrics, "Take It All" – The Reason 4

The British pop group, The Reason 4, released this song in 2011 – some 40 years after I transferred from Detroit College of Law to Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. Like many aspects of life, the lyrics ring only partially true for me.

When I was a child, I did have the whole world at my feet. But I was hurt – pressured by the world around me to modify my dreams; to let my actions speak, but only when they conformed to the expectations of authority figures at home, school, church, and in the community.

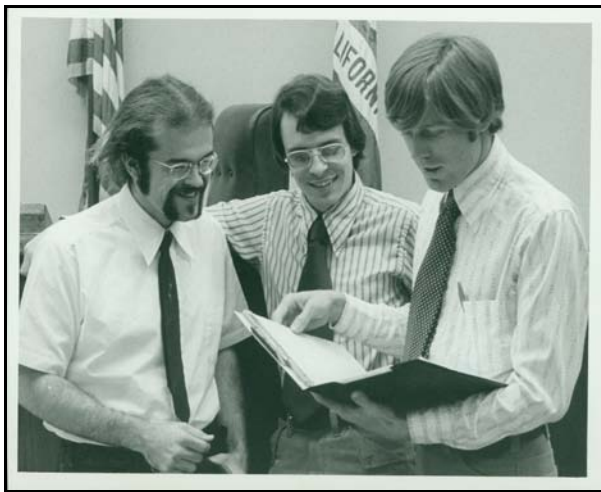
Imagine what it would be like to hold your breath for much longer than you can bear it . . . because the sound of breathing would alert a gunman to where you were hiding. Imagine walking a tight rope twenty feet above a danger zone . . . as shifting winds caused you to remain keenly aware of every step you took. That is what it was like growing up as a boy who could not share his true feelings, hopes, and dreams – all because they did not match societal rules and stereotypes.

It was not until I moved to California that I never doubted that I could be who I wanted to be. The taste of freedom and the experience of diversity inspired me to believe in myself, to dream about a world where justice prevailed, and to be strong. Once I experienced those feelings, and knew that



Tom at age 10 in 1958

I had inside me what it would take to be an advocate for equality and justice, I was willing to be strong and take the fall. Perhaps I was fortunate that my Dad made me play hardball as a child, because what I was about to encounter as I promoted these lofty ideals was going to be tough.



Tom and other gay law students fight injustice

It was during my second year in law school – after I was adjusted as a student at Loyola in Los Angeles – that I mustered the courage to break the implicit code of silence and invisibility. With a handful of other students at Loyola, UCLA, USC, and Southwestern law schools, I founded the first gay law students association in the nation. I took it a step further and became the first openly gay representative of any law school in the Law Student Division of the American Bar Association. I asked the dean if being so open about my sexual orientation would bar me from becoming a lawyer. Homosexuality was still a felony in California. Would the Committee of Bar Examiners exclude me from admission to the bar on the grounds that I lacked “good moral

character” which was a prerequisite to admission? The dean did not know the answer. I decided to take the fall and risk it all. I would go for broke and fight for justice as an openly gay law student. I was lucky. Unlike a friend of mine in Ohio who had to undergo formal hearings, with hours of testimony about his sexual activities, I was admitted to the bar without an inquisition.

The first few years of my law practice were devoted to fighting police harassment of gay men. The police spent millions of dollars sending undercover vice officers out into the community to entice and entrap gay men into compromising situations. They were arrested and forced to plea bargain because, if they did not “cop a plea” and if they were convicted after a trial, they would be required to register as sex offenders for the rest of their lives. Teachers, doctors, and even lawyers lost their professional licenses because of police entrapment. I gave it all that I had. After six years of persistent struggle, I won a case in the California Supreme Court in 1979 that changed everything. The court adopted new rules that prohibited such entrapment. My wildest dreams came true!

My tactics then changed from litigation to politics and coalition building. During his second term as Governor, Jerry Brown appointed me in 1981 to be executive director of the Governor’s Commission on Personal Privacy. I used that position to work with the 25 commission members, to build a network of special interest groups to advance the privacy rights of each of these constituencies. Gays and lesbians. Seniors. People with disabilities. Nontraditional families.

It was in 1980 that I had another “Aha Moment” – only this time it was very personal. Although it was in a professional context at my law office in Hollywood, the moment I met Michael A. Vasquez I knew I was in love. Looking into his eyes was transformational for me. I soon discovered that he felt the same way about me. Within a few weeks we were dating. That led to courtship, followed by engagement. When we decided to marry, that led to an exploration of where we would marry.



At that time in history, there was no nation on the planet that recognized same-sex marriage. So we struggled for a while over where the ceremony would occur. It was then that the independent thinking promoted at Monteith College, and the decision I had made at Loyola to fight for equal rights, conjured up a solution to this dilemma. We would exchange vows in international waters – a location where no nation has jurisdiction and where we could exercise our basic human rights as citizens of the world. So that is what we did. We chartered a triple-decker boat that normally took people to Catalina Island, and went with nearly 300 guests – including both of my parents and both of his parents – out to

sea. We exchanged vows in some rather choppy waters beyond the three-mile territorial limit. That was it. We were married – at least in our own eyes and the eyes of our families and friends.

The following decades saw me taking up one cause after another – each with its own urgent call to my passion for justice and equal rights. When the Privacy Commission ended, the California Attorney General tapped me for a position on his Commission on Racial, Ethnic, Religious, and Minority Violence. I stood shoulder to shoulder with African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, Christians, men, women, seniors, and people with disabilities. We worked for eight years formulating methods to promote understanding and appreciation for diversity, as well as ways to combat violence and hate crimes against minorities.

Then came my “family diversity” era – a decade of promoting respect for all family relationships, whether traditional or nontraditional, married or unmarried. Much of this work was with the media, perhaps more than with courts or legislatures. Promoting an expanded definition of family in public policy and by private businesses, I found myself on national television, on radio talk shows, and in newspapers coast to coast.

Next up was the “singles rights” era – more than a dozen years in which I promoted equal rights for single individuals and for unmarried couples, regardless of sexual orientation. I headed the American Association for Single People. We walked the halls of Congress promoting equal rights for this invisible, but growing minority of unmarried Americans. I fought and won court battles for unmarried heterosexual couples – people who had been denied equal benefits at work by employers who wanted to save money, and people who had been denied housing by religious landlords who wanted to impose their personal beliefs on others.

Before I moved on to disability rights, I worked for two years with my colleague, Dr. Nora Baladerian, and my spouse Michael, to fight for the rights of teenagers who were sometimes shipped off to boot camps or boarding schools by their parents. The parents hired kidnapers who took these

kids to remote locations where they were “reprogrammed” to be compliant and obedient sons and daughters. Never mind that some of them committed suicide and that others were emotionally scarred for life by the mistreatment they received at these facilities. By working in cooperation with other like-minded reformers, we were eventually able to bring this industry to a grinding halt.

Then came the era of disability rights – a time in my life that continues to the present and which has no end in sight. I have been, and am, fighting for the rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. My work for this cause was inspired by my friend Dr. Nora J. Baladerian. It is also completely supported by my spouse. A major portion of our focus involves promoting a greater awareness of, and effective responses to, abuse of children and adults with developmental disabilities. This is a national problem. People with such disabilities are at much greater risk of abuse than the generic population.

Another aspect of my work in the field of disability rights involves reforming the adult guardianship system. Just like some seniors who have dementia or other cognitive impairments, some adults with intellectual disabilities need to have a guardian appointed by a court to make decisions on their behalf. On the surface, this seems benign enough. Unfortunately, things are not always as nice as they seem in theory.

The reality is that court systems throughout the nation are using these guardianship proceedings to unnecessarily, and illegally, strip millions of adults of their right to make decisions. Decisions regarding medical care, housing, education, finances, social contacts, sexual relationships, and marriage. While the overkill of the guardianship system also affects scores of seniors, much of the brunt of these injustices is experienced by adults with developmental disabilities. That is where I am devoting my attention. I have become the primary reform advocate in the nation on this issue.

Just as I found my proper place in the world when I moved to California, I have now found the most appropriate role at this stage of my life. Using the advocacy skills I have developed with all of these other issues and causes, I am now and into the indefinite future will be providing a voice for those who are not able to articulate and advocate for themselves. Someday, when I die and if I am able to look back at my life, I may find that this stage of my life – as an advocate for people with developmental disabilities – was the main event in terms of professional advocacy. All the rest may have been training, helping me to develop the skills necessary to take on an establishment and power structure that is resistant to giving this vulnerable population access to justice and equal rights under the law.



Disability and Abuse Project Executive Committee:
Tom Coleman, Nora Baladerian, and Jim Stream