

# Ferndale

## CITY GUIDE

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# CONTINING TO FIGHT INJUSTICE

**F**rom an early age, Attorney Thomas F Coleman has had the mindset to fight for the underdog.

"My mother said that she always saw me kind of as an advocate or something. She knew I was going to be a lawyer before I did." Coleman said. He believes his first bout of standing up for others started in his home. Coleman's father suffered from alcoholism and would say unpleasant things while drunk. Coleman was the only one to fight back and challenge him. "I learned how to really argue well with my father." Coleman said.

Feeling like the underdog became more of a personal realization for Coleman during adolescence while attending **St. James High School**. "I kind of knew I was gay early on in life, but growing up Catholic – being an altar boy and a choirboy going to Catholic school – I suppressed it all. I was like an invisible minority.

So that, I think, made me understand what it's like to be in a disadvantaged class. Because otherwise growing up in Ferndale if you were white, Christian, middle class, heterosexual...you just fit right in. Life was easy. In school, if you were heterosexual and so on you just fit right in. So I didn't feel like I fit in, and I saw things differently."

Coleman said.

**T**HESE INCIDENTS ARE JUST A FEW AMONG MANY THAT PROPELLED COLEMAN to eventually study law and graduate in 1971 from **Loyola University School of Law** in Los Angeles. After finishing school Coleman went on to fight for social injustices, LGBT rights, disability rights and more; in Los Angeles, Michigan, and around the world.

Years later, when Coleman received an invitation to the St. James' 50th class reunion, it made him reflect on his time in Ferndale. He kept going back and forth trying to decide if he should attend.

"And finally the spirit moved me. I said if I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it big. So, I thought, 'I will write a book about growing up in Ferndale.'" Coleman decided not to make the book just about his life, but the life

experiences of growing up in Ferndale during a very different time period.

"I want to tell the truth. I want to talk about it historically, politically, economically, and racially...all of that was going on." Coleman explained. He wrote the book, *"Growing Up in Ferndale,"* and held a book release reception in September 2016 at **Affirmations**. The 64-page book highlights racism, anti-Semitism, politics, homophobia, and more in Ferndale during the 1950s and 1960s.

### Telling stories of the past reminds us of how far we've come and the history we've made along the way.

**A**LTHOUGH COLEMAN RELOCATED TO CALIFORNIA IN 1971, he is still advocating for

Michigananders suffering. Through the years, he's worked with various colleagues including **Dan Sivil** of the **Association of Suburban People**, **Attorney David Piontkowsky** of the **Michigan Organization for Human Rights**, and attorney **Rudy Serra** on various legal cases. For the majority of his career, Coleman has worked through a nonprofit called the **Spectrum Institute**, which he founded in 1987.

For the last ten years Coleman's focus has been conservatorship and guardianship reform. In addition, he gives lectures, hosts workshops, creates educational material, training material, and much more. He currently works as a legal consultant for the **Alternatives to Guardianship Project**.

Ferndale has changed drastically compared to Coleman's childhood, and he takes notice when he can visit. The freedoms, opportunities, and spaces that many youth and young adults enjoy today was only a dream when he was younger; especially the supportive gay community. Coleman still watches over his hometown and it will always hold a special place in his heart. ■

Coleman currently lives in California with his husband, **Michael A. Vasquez**. His book is free and available via PDF by emailing [tomcolemant@earthlink.net](mailto:tomcolemant@earthlink.net).



By Malissa Martin

# Tom Coleman: Ferndale Trailblazer