

Coleman's Victories Are Ours

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Photos by Pat Rocco

GAY LAWYER'S CRUSADE

When Coleman Wins, We All Win

By DONALD WARMAN
NewsWest News Editor

"At least two Thomas Colemans are L.A. lawyers," said a fairly recent headline in the Los Angeles Daily Journal, a circular devoted to legal matters and distributed around the downtown power centers.

The gist of the story was that an attorney named Thomas Henry Coleman wanted it known that he is *not* the same Tom Coleman who had just appeared before the Police Commission to refute some crude remarks Police Chief Ed Davis had made about gays in a television interview.

That guy, Thomas Frank Coleman, was identified in the Daily Journal demurrer as "an admitted homosexual."

That Tom Coleman saves clippings, most of them reporting impressive advances he has made in what has sometimes seemed a one-man drive for homosexual equality under law.

A slim, sensitive-featured, deceptively soft-spoken man of only 27, Coleman has already attained national status among attorneys and social progressives who operate in the field of sexual civil liberties. The whole handful of them.

Coleman's clippings reveal that two years ago, even before he knew he had passed the California bar exams, he was instrumental in getting the full American Bar Assn. to come out for decriminalization of consenting-adult sex relations.

In the same fell swoop—1973 was a year of unusually heavy trips, even for Coleman—he virtually shamed the western regional division of ABA's law-student members into adopting the position that homosexuality itself should not disqualify a candidate from the legal profession.

The same triumph, which got off the ground during a dancing party of his none-too-receptive peer group, is probably the sweeter for Coleman. With a lawyer's caution and the natural reticence of a highly attuned young man proud enough to conceal whatever psychic scars he bears, Coleman prefers to talk of constructive things he has done and is doing.

But on occasion, when the vibes are right and the surroundings congenial, a receptive listener can pick up threads of another story. What the listener wants to make of it is up to him. Tom Coleman doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve.

"I met my lover on May 25, 1966. I was hitchhiking home from Wayne State University in Detroit, where I was a student. David Sterling was the driver who picked me up. Until then, I'd never had sex with anybody—man nor woman. David was—is—ten years older than I. We started going together, and I moved in with him." The home he left to join David was a Roman Catholic one, in which the teenager was one of nine brothers and sisters.

The home to which he moved, the one of his own making, wasn't without emotional complexities, either. "I never talked about it with my mother. But she must have known. David and I were sleeping in the same bed. And he, being older and fairly settled in life as a department manager in a big retail store, was very strong for family, too.

"He wanted to adopt a son."

At 18, Tom Coleman began to grapple with the idea of himself as a surrogate parent. "I wasn't ready," he recalls now. But things took their course. Three years later, with David's mother and grandmother living with them, David was awarded custody of an American Indian boy named John, then not yet ten years old. David's family and John's had been acquainted. With the presence of David's mother in the home, the custody proceeding was routine.

On graduation from Wayne, Coleman won a scholarship to the Detroit College of Law, and the framework of a legal career began to take shape. But other, more deeply personal matters were pressing on the David-and-Tom household, too.

"We decided not to live in Michigan any more. Our circumstances—a gay male couple with a child to raise—weren't right for where we were."

As it happened, Coleman came alone in 1971 to Los Angeles, where he sensed a more favorable climate for the life-situation he had embraced. With his religious and academic credentials in shape, he made it into Loyola University Law School.

"I wasn't openly gay at school. I felt alienated." Then, through a personal ad in the old Advocate, he met another gay law student, this one from the Southwestern School of Law. "I thought, thank God! There are two of us!"

Coleman soon learned there were more than two. Some anonymous student put a note on the Loyola law school bulletin board suggesting that those of them who were of the homosexual persuasion meet at 10 on a certain night at a particular Highland Ave. address. Somebody else had added, "Make it 11?"

Neither Coleman nor his new friend attended. "Can you imagine? This was only four years ago, and we were scared. I don't know if anybody went there that night."

The following week, a more specific note appeared. It repeated the suggestion and named the location of the rendezvous as Dude City. The ice was broken. Several students appeared in varying degrees of embarrassment, relief or whatever:

"It became a regular weekly thing. Some fellows from Southwestern, USC and UCLA joined up. We moved our meetings to the old Gay Community Services Center on Wilshire, and began thinking about some purpose, some matters of mutual concern we should be occupying ourselves with.

"One of our group was Jerry Gordon, who had a party at his home one night. His father was there. So that's how I met Al Gordon." The "matters of mutual concern" the gay law students had been looking for were becoming apparent now—at least to Coleman. The elder Gordon, a crusty, wily, tireless and tenacious criminal defense attorney, had lately become immersed in fighting the injustices he saw done in Los Angeles vice enforcement of the lewd conduct laws.

So fiercely had the reality of those injustices been brought home to the Gordon household that even now Al Gordon speaks of the incident rarely and reluctantly. But Coleman was caught up in the intensity of it. His immediate work and, to some extent, the most effective thrust of his legal goals, came into focus.

Under Gordon's guidance, Coleman and a fellow law student, Rick Angel, pursued a self-appointed summer project of interviewing defendants in lewd conduct cases at the time of arraignment.

"You can imagine what we found. Except for a few female prostitutes, the defendants were all men on gay-related charges. The pattern of the similarity of evidence and the severity of convictions in homosexual cases was evident to us very soon."

At summer's end, Angel and Coleman persuaded the Loyola law faculty to let them pursue their probe of that vice-bust pattern as an on-going project. Their data poured in until the end of June, 1974, when a belatedly alarmed city attorney's office, probably aware of what was being proved, cut off the project's access to the court records on which it depended.

Coleman's staggering display of arrest evidence, now computerized, rests today in his Wilshire Blvd. office, awaiting the moment when circumstances bring it to light in the most effective possible way.

(So thorough is Project Arraignment that Coleman and his volunteer helpers know, for instance, which zealous Hollywood Division vice specialist invariably catches his suspects "masturbating," as well as exactly where and when he makes his busts. The implication of entrapment is enormous and will, at the auspicious moment, probably be devastating.)

During the same summer of 1972, when the curious pattern in Los Angeles vice squad busts began intriguing Coleman, he became involved with the American Bar Assn.'s law student branch, which numbered a few acknowledged homosexuals among its generally uptight, establishment-oriented ranks.

As a student representative to the ABA's convention in San Francisco that year, Coleman introduced a highly significant "Single Person's Bill of Rights." Its effect would be to oppose discrimination against unmarrieds in the fields of taxes, housing, credit and employment. Three years later, a weakened version of that legislation was approved. The fact that it originated with a homosexual was not lost on the lawyers who, by endorsing it, moved the anti-discrimination package closer to becoming law.

By this time, Coleman's chosen family—David and the boy, John—had been reunited with him in Los Angeles. And Coleman was known, with a developing sense of self-pride, as "the gay guy" on the Loyola campus.

Soon before law school graduation the next spring, Coleman took the forum of a western regional conference of ABA law students in Los Angeles to introduce his touchy resolution which would forbid homosexuality to be used as a disqualification from practicing law.

The night before that crucial day was the occasion of a students' dance at the Hilton. Coleman attended with his student buddy, the same one he'd met through the Advocate ad back in the days

when he thought there were only two of that kind of guy around.

"After a few drinks, he and I got up and danced. Apart, at first, and then close. There was a lot of consternation and chill in the air. I thought, oh my God! There goes the resolution." But the resolution passed. Another patch of ice was broken.

Coleman graduated with honors and as recipient of two major awards from his national and western regional peer groups. His mother came from Detroit to the occasion and for a reunion with the "other" family. Coleman thinks she went home satisfied with what she had seen.

It was inevitable that Coleman's sphere of activity and influence was destined to broaden. While still a student, he had introduced himself to the National Committee for Sexual Civil Liberties, a youthful and progressive group of lawyers and others including gays and involving—but by no means restricted to—gay rights activities.

"In Los Angeles in those days," he recalls, "Al Gordon and I were the only lawyers who were seriously into the field. As a matter of principle, I mean. To extend what we'd begun here, I had to look for a wider outreach."

Coleman became the founder of SexualLawReporter, a bimonthly bulletin of present and proposed legislation on anything significantly concerning sexuality. A well written and surprisingly lively publication, it operates out of Coleman's office, with Joel Tlumak and Michael Wetherbee editing, and with a volunteer staff of legislative and judicial researchers.

The publication is aimed at a readership of social activists, judges, lawyers and educational groups. The idea of it occurred to Coleman during his first exposure to the National Sexual Civil Liberties Committee, but it was less than a year ago that Coleman could raise enough financial backing to get it going.

Its founder clearly regards SexualLawReporter as among his favorite accomplishments. Although he doesn't say so, its content and impact—like those of the Single People's Bill of Rights—go not only to the situation of the isolated, alienated homosexual. They are within the mainstream of current progressive American thought. And that is where Thomas Frank Coleman has staked his place.

This is the same Tom Coleman who, barely four years ago, was afraid to respond to a bulletin board notice which implied the possibility that he might reveal himself as what the Los Angeles Daily Journal called "an admitted homosexual."

That clipping, in which another lawyer backs away from being associated, even erroneously, with him, clearly has a special, private meaning to Coleman.

"You know," he told a recent office visitor whose eye happened to fall on the story, "among Los Angeles lawyers, the Journal is a paper of record." He lets the subject drop, but the thought behind the remark is certainly more than a passing one.

Pondering his present situation in the world, Coleman spreads his articulate, artist's hands wide: "I'm balanced between two institutions—career and home.

"Half my working time is income-producing, mostly defending gay cases, sometimes senior citizens, who have a terrible row to hoe, too. I'm not into test cases—I haven't got the time—but I'll take a free one if the principle is there. D'you remember Bob Opel, the City Council streaker? The one who streaked the Academy Awards? There was an interesting First Amendment test. That was my first trial. Al Gordon helped me."

Opel, a free-wheeling exhibitionist, was convicted last year of disrupting a public meeting of the Los Angeles City Council, by stripping to contend that nudity is not lewd. Coleman beat the original charge; the disruption conviction is on appeal.

"The other half of my career goes to lobbying, for penal code reform, for movement activities in general. And to the Reporter."

About the second institution—home:

"When David came out here, we bought a four-unit place in Glendale for income. I was still a student then. We still live there, because we can't afford to buy anything else right now.

"But I don't like the neighborhood, for John's sake. He's 16 now, and he seems to be making a comfortable heterosexual orientation. But, being an Indian, he's dark-skinned, which is a problem in Glendale.

"And he brings his school friends home, and they see that instead of parents, he lives with two men. You understand. It isn't easy for him."

HIS LIFE'S CAMPAIGN FOR EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW BEGAN BY NAILING DOWN HIS PRIVATE BILL OF RIGHTS