

## KCET – Public Television – Los Angeles

### *Life & Times*

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AASP executive director, Thomas F. Coleman, was interviewed in the Thinkers, Shakers, and Newsmakers segment of "Life & Times Tonight" a week nightly news and public affairs program of KCET public television in Los Angeles. Below is the transcript of the interview.

Co-hosting the show are Warren Olney and Val Zavalla.

Warren>> When you work in a busy office, is it fair if just one person always gets stuck working late or coming in on holidays? Some single people claim that's exactly what happens to them. So an organization called the American Association for Single People is working to end what they call marital status discrimination. Val talked with the group's executive director in tonight's thinkers, shakers & newsmakers.

Val>> Give me an example of how single people are discriminated against?

Thomas Coleman>> Society is pretty much geared toward the assumption that everyone will marry and stay married, so the rights and benefits in society are geared that way, whether it's employment benefits or taxes or the right to sue someone who kills a loved one that you might be living with that you're not married to. So many ways.

Val>> Let's go a little deeper into the one that I see all the time. Employment. Now, although I love my coworkers and they work really hard, you can't help but notice that parents really do take more time off from work and the benefits that allow them to and single people, as you said, often have to take up the slack.

Thomas Coleman>> Yeah, it's true. Of course, single people fall into a variety of categories. Some of them are single parents and so --

Val>> That's true, and they really do need the time off.

Thomas coleman>> -- they have some special needs. But an employer -- generally, most people talk about equal pay for equal work and basing pay on productivity and merit. If that's the case, then your personal living situation should not take priority over work-related matters and who gets paid equally or whatever. With respect to the single people that don't have children, and they make up anywhere between 25 to 30 percent of any workforce, when 5:00 hits or 4:00 hits or something and everyone's scrambling to go to the daycare centers or to schools to pick up their kids, who stays there? Single people.

When overtime is required or on holidays, very often single people are asked to do the job. Or if an employer needs someone to relocate to another city or an office in another part of the city, the assumption is made, "well, you're single. You don't have any family or connections. You don't have a life. You go and do it." so those are some of the ways in which there is discrimination in the workplace.

Val>> Have you been able to quantify this at all?

Thomas Coleman>> Well, in terms of the employee benefits themselves, and benefits constitute about 25 to 30 percent of an employee's compensation. Now some of that benefit is for the employee himself or herself, so fine, the single person will get that. But when people are able to get benefits, health, dental, vision and other benefits, for three or four children or for a spouse, even though the spouse might be their third spouse, third marriage or something, and then somebody with a domestic partner, same sex or opposite sex, domestic partner, an unmarried couple, when they're not getting the benefits, they're being cheated. They're doing the same job and maybe even a better job than the person at the next desk who's married, but they're being paid less, and the single person --

Val>> you say they're being paid less because they're unable --

Thomas coleman>> benefits compensation.

Val>> -- to take advantage of the --

Thomas coleman>> because it's structured in that way. It doesn't have to be. I mean, in the olden days, you got your paycheck and, if you wanted health insurance, you paid for it yourself out of your own pocket. But now, most employee benefits are non-taxable, so the federal government doesn't tax them. Therefore, more and more compensation is being given to employees in the form of benefits to avoid taxes. So that's helping employees to some extent, but the ones that don't fit the criteria are being cheated. And the single person without a partner is really being cheated.

Val>> Single persons without a partner or without children are really getting cheated? They can't take advantage of family leave or paternity or maternity leave, all those things. Then you mentioned, as well, the health --

Thomas coleman>> the real fair way for an employer to deal with this is to have a cafeteria style benefits plan, give the same amount of credits to each employee to use and then, depending on how -- someone might need daycare, somebody might need adult daycare for their elderly parent. That single person might have an elderly parent at home or some other blood relative who's in need that they would want to put on their health insurance or whatever.

Val>> ah, that's a great idea. So everyone gets 100 credits or dollars to use and then you just buy the particular benefits that suit you?

Thomas coleman>> Yeah, and I'm single and if I'm going to remain single throughout my life, I'm not going to have people to take care of me when I'm older, so I might want to put more into my retirement fund because I am my own dependent over the course of time.

Val>> What do you say to people who say our society should be infused with laws that encourage people to get married, to have children, to form families, singlehood is not good, single parents are not good? All these laws you're talking about have a purpose and values behind them that are good for America.

Thomas Coleman>> Well, these are generalizations. Let me give you an example of some outdated laws. When laws or judges call children born to unmarried parents bastards or illegitimates to shame the parents, but they're stigmatizing the children, that supposedly would encourage people not to have children out of wedlock. "I don't want my child called illegitimate or a bastard." those laws aren't working. A lot of the other laws -- I mean, we're all taxpaying citizens. We're all equal in the society and we should be treated equally, regardless of our marital status.

I know many people who get married and supposedly fit the proper model and they have terrible marriages, they're bad role models for their kids, they're spouse abusers or they're alcoholics or they're not working and whatever. But just because they're married, they're put in that privileged class and given all these benefits. Yet the single person who stays after to help the class, or --

Val>> very upstanding citizen in every way.

Thomas coleman>> all of that, does volunteer work and so on, that person is penalized. I think it's time to stop the generalizations and to treat people as individuals with respect and dignity and fairness. You shouldn't be penalized just because you're single in this society.

Single people are like anybody else. Some good, some bad, some in between, but many of them are contributing members of society who can stay over to take -- what teacher can stay to take care of kids after school, after hours? The single person. The others may have kids and they've got to go home to their own kids, to take of their family. So single people -- I mean, mother theresa was single. The pope is single. There are a lot of single people that are just -- you know, you put them up on a pedestal and say they're really contributing to society and yet they're thrown into the same class that's being discriminated against.

Val>> Thomas coleman, executive director of American Association for Single People, thank you so much for stopping by.

Thomas Coleman>> Thank you.

Val>> So, warren, what do you think of that cafeteria of benefits?

Warren>> I think it's a very challenging and interesting idea. A very good one. I think also the pope gets some special benefits that the rest of us don't, so he's in a special category.

Val>> Right. The pope doesn't have to worry about retirement in that respect. No, I hope that corporations really change and progress --

Warren>> it's a very interesting idea. Why not? It wouldn't cost them anything.

Val>> I think it's a great idea. As jobs become more competitive, corporations may have to change.

Well, what do you think? Do singles have a legitimate beef? We'd love to hear your comments on this or any of our reports here on life and times tonight. Here are the ways you can reach us.

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