

Gary Norman: Seeing and Seizing the Opportunity to Serve

By Tom Calarco

Gary Norman was born with retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic disorder that gradually diminished his vision. Today, he is almost totally blind. But visual impairment hasn't stopped the Maryland-based attorney from becoming a champion for disability rights. The self-effacing man credits some of his success to his disability.

"Being disabled gives me insights and experiences I might not otherwise have," says the Brunswick, Ohio, native.

"My mom was a housewife and part-time worker, and my Dad [was] a Marine and Korean War vet, who rose to an executive level position with the railroad in Cleveland, Ohio," he says. "My mom was involved in the PTA and my Dad in city government. I think I acquired her social skills and my Dad's organizational skills."

These abilities and their encouragement helped Norman navigate the learning problems and career challenges he faced in his youth. He began using a cane in the seventh grade and by tenth grade could barely read large print. When he matriculated at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, he could no longer see large print and transitioned to using books on tape.

"Wright State had the best setting for disabled student services in Ohio," Norman says. "I thought I would acquire a history Ph.D., but I wanted to make an impact on society and thought law would be a better way to do this."

While enrolled at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, Norman spent two summers clerking for civil rights attorney David Roth, an advocate for the poor and the founder of the now defunct Cleveland Works, a nonprofit organization that provided job training, social services and legal aid to persons on welfare. Clerking there left a great impression on Norman and helped to

shape his view of the role lawyers should play in society. “Attorneys should be lawyer-statesmen, utilizing their skills to improve society” he says.

After passing the Ohio Bar in November 2000, Norman received a two-year prestigious appointment, the Presidential Management Fellowship, with the Department of Health and Human Services in Baltimore, Maryland, where he now works as a staff attorney.

Norman acquired a guide dog while serving as a PMF as he believed this partnership in independence would help him to navigate the built environment as a blind attorney.

A yellow lab named Langer was his partner for some nine years. “By my side when I got married, and when my mom passed away,” Norman says with affection “Langer was a dedicated and talented guide dog.” Though Langer has since retired, the canine is still part of the Norman family. Taking his place as a guide dog is Pilot, a Labrador and golden retriever mix, who is also from Guide Dogs for the Blind.

“They have different personalities,” Norman says. “Langer was good for me as a bachelor, but Pilot is more socially oriented, runs a little faster, and is more exuberant.”

Norman’s love for his dogs has led him to become an advocate for the rights of guide dogs and other service animals.

“I endeavor to advocate for guide dogs to give back for the partnership I have receive,” he says. “There are positives and negatives to having a guide dog,” he says. Access denial, such as being refused lodgings at a hotel, is one of the negatives. Among the positives he provides, having an opportunity to experience the good will of strangers, like when people he doesn’t know open doors for him or give him directions. “Having a guide dog makes me less visually impaired in the sense of my enhanced ability to travel with confidence and safety,” he says.

Norman led the creation of the first-ever pilot ambulance service for guide dogs with the Baltimore County Fire Department and the Maryland Fund for emergency assistance for the care of guide dogs. He also has authored entries in reference works, given presentations, and been involved in formulating laws and public policy on the issue. Last year he founded the Mid-Atlantic Regional Animal Symposium.

“The purpose was to bring intellectuals together to talk about animal law and to improve the understanding of it,” he says. “It’s an emerging field.”

Norman also has had papers published in several legal journals on topics that include disability rights, animal rights, and the Paralympics.

“To be disabled has challenges and barriers that need to be removed.”

In a scholarly paper he wrote for the *Health Law and Policy Brief*, the journal of American University’s Washington College of Law, Norman argued that medical recommendations to abort a pregnancy because of the probable birth of a disabled child are a reflection of the negativity and prejudice that disabled persons endure today.

Norman’s involvement in civic activities belies any assumptions that he lacks capacity. “Every person should be as independent as possible, and do as much as possible by themselves,” he says.

His deep commitment to and involvement in disability issues are an example of the valuable contributions people with disabilities can make to society. He is legal counsel to the board of Northern Baltimore County Jaycees; vice president and secretary of Senior Mediation and Decision-Making; and former CEO and president of the Maryland Area Guide Dog Users. Last year, he was appointed by Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley to be one of the nine

commissioners on the Maryland Human Relations Commission. In that position, he adjudicates civil rights complaints. Someday, he hopes to enter elected politics.

“My intent is to open a private practice and run for public office. I had envisioned myself to run for office in Ohio, but will do so wherever the fates have me be led,” he says.

Wherever that might be and whatever position he holds, Norman says he will continue to work on making our body of law on rights and disabilities enforced and understood. While he does so, his talented wife, a medical social worker, Laura Norman, will be at his side.

“I have had a good life, but not an easy life,” he says. “I see myself both as blessed and disadvantaged. Some people will view me with lower expectations, and there is the personal discrimination and the access denial because of my guide dog. I want to make things better for those who come behind me. In doing so, I also honor my mom and my dad, who instilled in me a dedication to community service.”

“Every person needs to have a supportive spouse in the mold of a Martha Washington or Abigail Adams. I am fortunate in this regard.”

In recent years, Norman has received numerous honors, including: the Edward F. Shea, Jr. Award for Professionalism given by the Maryland State Bar Foundation; the American Marshall Memorial Fellow, a one-month sojourn to Europe awarded distinguished scholars under 40 to promote better understanding of European affairs; the Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award from his alma mater, Wright State University; and selection by the Jaycees as one their “Ten Most Outstanding Young Americans” of 2009. He has also become a sought-after public speaker. Despite this recognition, his dog Pilot is not impressed.

“I usually have his leash in my hand when I speak,” Norman says. “But Pilot usually falls asleep and sometimes can be heard snoring.”