

AMY ARELLANO, ATTORNEY AT LAW

Amy Arellano is a Civil Litigation Lawyer in Pasadena, California

TSA: We've featured individuals with a wide variety of professions. Please tell us a little about your career in law.

Amy Arellano: I've only been in law for two years. I was in the entertainment industry first. I did everything—I was even an extra in movies and for TV. I did it for fun at first and then I got internships in production. I've been interested in everything behind the camera. And then I started to work for a talent agency. I plan to return to the entertainment industry. I'm interested in producing.

TSA: The impact of TS varies from person to person. What has been the biggest impact of TS on your life?

AA: I wouldn't be the person I am today if I had not been diagnosed at age nine. It had a great impact. My parents told me—first and foremost—that TS didn't change what I was capable of and shouldn't stop me. I got a lot of positive reinforcement from them.

Then there was twirling. I think the diagnosis led to twirling. I've always done it. My older sister was in a marching band and I loved to follow the twirlers around from her high school.

Twirling was such a creative outlet and I was training up to four hours a day with gymnastics, ballet and jazz. Everything you do for ice-skating, you do for twirling. I even worked with fire batons in competitions for a while.

I started learning early, joined a group called the San Gabriel Twirlers. Then I concentrated on solo competitions in state, regional and even in international championships. My parents turned over every stone for me—coaches from all over, everything. I took formal baton twirling lessons from ages 18 to 25. Now I coach and judge competitions too. Had I not received the positive reinforcement from my parents I would not have been the "Golden Girl at UCLA."

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TSA: What was it like when you were a child at school? Did you have any role models?

AA: When I was diagnosed we didn't know what it was and it wasn't until many years later that I realized I should have gotten accommodations in school. In the late 1970s and 80s, I had a very hard time with my instructors. They didn't understand my symptoms and didn't understand TS. I was ridiculed by my teachers and by my classmates too. Elementary school was a very, very rough experience.

My mother had taught me to read at a very early age. My advanced reading comprehension kept me in classes, but there were many times when they all thought my TS was behavioral. We had a hard time with the school district and we didn't know what I was entitled to.

My parents and my friends were so good, but we weren't aware of anyone with TS, so there were no role models. I used a lot of behavioral methods and medications. From Junior High through High School it was calmer and my parents got more assertive. They let the school know they wouldn't tolerate abuse and that the teachers and students had to know this.*

TSA: When you were diagnosed did you look back at your family and see that anyone else had symptoms that might have been TS?

AA: Nothing on both sides, but one year before I was diagnosed I had a severe head trauma and as a baby I had strep throat.**

TSA: Stress has a big impact on people with TS. Do you do anything to help alleviate your stress?

AA: Both good stress and bad stress can activate my symptoms. Late in college I was weaned off medication. I was OK for a while and then when I started law school I had fierce symptoms. It was either take the medications or deal with the horrible reaction of other people to my symptoms.

Now I de-stress twirling. I coach twice a week, teach and travel to judge. It's a little bit sedentary, but reading is also a huge de-stresser for me. I make time for it.

TSA: What did you think of the National Conference in April?

AA: It was my first one and I wrote a glowing letter to Judit Ungar. It was such a positive experience. I attended the Chapter Training as the Vice Chair of Southern California TSA. I could not get over how welcomed I was to this TSA family! They were just wonderful. They welcomed me like I was an old friend. I look forward to nurturing these relationships.

I was able to see my congressman again in California. His legislative assistants were amazing and they have already gotten back to me about the positive experience. I'm even considering running for city council. During another visit to the Capitol (not during the conference) I attended a breakfast with Senator Diane Feinstein and 100 other people. I talked to her about TS. While I was in law school I was a substitute teacher. I am aware of the education agenda and as a lawyer I'm concerned with people with disabilities.

TSA: TS is in the media a great deal lately. Some of the presentations are more realistic and more positive than others. What do you think of the role of the media in increasing awareness?

AA: It's very negative—at the point where we need to do something about it. People with TS need to go places without a fear of disapproval. Every time I meet someone I try my hardest to be open about it, but I'm entitled to be in public, too.

In the 70s and 80s, kids with Down's Syndrome were looked at funny, but now we all know what Down's Syndrome is. There needs to be a greater awareness—and not just about coprolalia. My own boss mentioned that he's never heard me curse. We need the media to clean up its act and present more positive images.

TSA: Do you have any last words for kids with TS and their parents?

AA: TS does not prevent you from doing what you want to do.

* See the downloadable article on bullying in the ed/advocacy section of TSA's web site.

** Strep has been the subject of many studies, but there is no clear TS/Strep connection to date. Head trauma is generally a supposed causal connection to TS.

