

## A Family Portrait

# JIM COUCHENOUR

Jim Couchenour is the Director of Marketing and Ministry Services at Cogun Inc., a general contractor specializing in building churches. He is also a composer and musician. He is a member of an Alternative Christian Funk Band called SoundDoctrine, and released a solo CD entitled Living Colour in 2004. Jim and his wife, Lynette, have been married for 22 years and they have two daughters, Katie and Jamie.



### Tell us about your two careers as a musician and as a businessman.

Being a musician is not actually a career, but I travel with the band and it is an interesting balance between Cogun, music and serving as a worship leader at church, where I also do the music. At Cogun we design and build churches and part of my job in ministry services is to help the churches stay on track, keeping their focus on their ministry and not on the building process. I also do marketing, advertising and work on the website. My dad started the company in 1970 and to date we've built over 640 churches. We're blessed with 65 employees and have offices all along the eastern seaboard.

### Has TS had an impact on your work?

That's a good question. I was diagnosed at the age of 39. I think the impact of TS is that I am more interested in the creative side of things. I love to design ads and write music and I think that's consistent with the creativity of people with TS.

When I found out, I told the people that I work with closely that if they heard strange noises from my office that it was TS. It didn't change anything, but it was good for me to be able to share the name with them and that I was OK. I don't like long meetings and I find that I need to take breaks, to get away and not have to control my tics.

### What about coping before you knew it was TS?

I'm fortunate that I don't have a bad case, but it was sometimes difficult for the people closest to me. My wife and I had a lot of conversations about it and there were times when she couldn't understand why I was making noises and tics. I had to say that I didn't know why I did it. My two girls accepted it very well, even before we knew what it was, but it was sometimes frustrating for them and for me. In public I did my best to control my tics and relax.

### Since you were diagnosed at the age of 39 you went through school, all the way through your MBA, not knowing what caused your tics. What was school like for you?

I always thought that it was just a habit that I had to get control of. My parents and I had a lot of talks about controlling my habits and all through school and college I did my best to control it as much as I could. I was very fortunate that my friends, especially in college, were very understanding. I've talked to some of them since the diagnosis, asking them if they noticed it. They said they did but just thought of it as part of me. They were very gracious about it.

I remember in high school my best friend was making fun of me, making the same noises as me in church and it was upsetting. After church I did something that was out of character and I hauled off and hit him. I felt bad afterwards. It was just one of the events that I had to deal with.

I remember thinking before I got married that I'd have to get control of this habit because no girl would put up with it. My wife was the only woman I dated who asked me about it. I shut down and wouldn't talk about it.

### How were you finally diagnosed?

My wife saw a program on TV. It was a talk show and it described the symptoms. My natural response was defensive and not to deal with it, but the more she talked about the symptoms the more it sounded like me. We went online — we didn't even know how to spell Tourette — and then bought a book about it. It was too much of a coincidence to ignore. I went to a neurologist who confirmed it was TS.

That discovery is hard to put into words. For the first time in my life I knew that this was how God wired me. This is who I am. Until then it had been a constant struggle to get control of it. It took weeks to come to grips with that but it was about finding out that it was OK.

### How did your family react?

I can't talk about it without getting emotional. I remember sitting down with my family — my mom, dad, brothers and sisters — and sharing it with them. It was an amazing kind of coming together as a family, with my parents realizing that this was the way I was wired and that we're all OK with it.

### Many people with TS have personal strategies for reducing stress. What do you do?

I run three times a week. I think that really helps and I lift weights, too. Of course when I'm creating a song or working on a video edit it goes away.

### Do you have anything you'd like to say to kids with TS and their parents?

I kept a journal when I was 13 or 14 and recorded a lot of what happened when I started having TS. Looking back at that journal after the diagnosis, seeing some of the things I wrote, it would have been amazing if someone could have told me that I'd be OK and that I'd be successful; that would have made a huge difference.

## SIMON AND SALLY HIT THE ROAD FOR TS AWARENESS

Simon and Sally, characters from TSA's own series of children's storybooks, are leaving the confines of their stories as part of a child-centric awareness campaign. Images of the characters are available for download and children are encouraged to take them to soccer games, ballet recitals, scout meetings, camp and everywhere children gather. The children are then urged to take photos of Sally or Simon at these events and send them to the new Sally and Simon online scrapbook, [sallyandsimon@tsa-usa.org](mailto:sallyandsimon@tsa-usa.org). Simon and Sally books are available on the TSA website [www.tsa-usa.org](http://www.tsa-usa.org).

