



JIM MERKLINGER

is an attorney at the Association of Corporate Counsel in Washington, DC, an organization that represents in-house counsels at more than 8,000 corporations in 53 countries. He has taught English in Japan, and with a knack for stumbling into historic events, witnessed the death of Emperor Hirohito and was in China during the Tiananmen Square massacre.



TSA: We've featured individuals in a wide variety of professions. You are our first "Washington insider." Please tell us a little about your career.

J.M.: My title is Associate General Counsel, which means I have multiple roles and meet with general counsel around the world to talk about employment issues, intellectual property and more. I put a face on the Association, speaking in front of groups of high level professionals—and I'm the guy with TS! I'm a very public person and it's funny. TS is not what you'd put on a list for public speakers, but I'm very comfortable being a public person.

TSA: The impact of TS varies from person to person. What do you think the effect has been on your life?

J.M.: From a professional standpoint, I think in some ways it (TS) drove me. I didn't want to be inhibited, so it made me more social. The running joke around the office is that wherever I go—across the country and around the world—I meet people I know. I think TS has made me more outgoing and more compassionate, because I realize what it's like to be misunderstood. It helps in relating to people. The result of being mistreated is that I wanted to try to treat people fairly and the majority of the time I think I succeed in being understanding. Those skills help me in my career.

I remember going through a lot of testing to find out what was wrong with me. Early on, all the professionals—the people who were supposed to be the smartest people in their work—didn't take the time to explain anything to me. The impression was, unless you communicate with your patients what good are you? Having been mistreated and having been teased, I don't

want to treat people that way. I've had people tell me I need to be meaner!

Some people say that with TS, you should avoid stress in the choice of a profession, but that's not exactly what I did. But it's not a law firm situation. I have long hours, but I don't have to bill hours, I just have to get my work done and I can afford to help people in need. I have time to do pro bono immigration work and other volunteer work. It's pretty exciting.

TSA: When were you were diagnosed?

J.M.: I was 14. It took seven years because of the lack of education among doctors. People said I should be institutionalized. They even sent my parents into marriage counseling. My parents thought it was their fault. Instead of saying, I don't know, the doctors all had their own answers—all wrong. But they couldn't admit they didn't know what was wrong.

Ironically, it was my mother that contacted the NIH. Through her own research she realized I had TS and contacted them and found out they were doing a study. She just forced her way in. I'm hardheaded and I get it from her. I think the diagnosis period is still too long.

TSA: What about your family? What did they do?

J.M.: They tried everything. I'm the oldest and I have two brothers and one sister. We're a pretty tight family. My sister is a teacher in Washington, DC. She also has TS and is nine years younger than me. She was diagnosed because I was diagnosed. My brothers both have traits, mild ones, almost unnoticeable unless they are really stressed out. It became apparent in one brother when he started running his own company. He was already in his thirties with a wife and small children.

TSA: What about school?

J.M.: Academically I didn't start out very well, but in college I got better. They didn't

know what to do with me and they didn't expect much of me. Things I enjoyed I learned really well so I realized I had the ability to learn things. At one point they stuck me in what had been a janitor's closet. That was my special ed reading room. They weren't sure if I needed special ed; they weren't sure if I needed special help. After a while they put me back into the classroom and I ended up working on my own and excelling in English. I got my degree in English and went on to teach it in Japan.

In high school at one point, I was very reclusive but overcame it. I don't have acting experience, but I've been told that actors are like that—shy. For whatever reason, I was lucky enough to figure out that the people who were being mean to me had bigger problems than I did. Part of me looked at that and said, "get on with it." You can't get a refund, can't get a new body. TS became a challenge. A lot of my friends say I'm hard-headed, but I like the word "resilient."

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

J.M.: Fatigue gets me down and stress makes it tough for me. I'm good at dealing with a lot of things at once—finishing up contracts that need to be done, redoing an apartment I'm renting out, a million things at once. I once joined a tennis league that started at 10 p.m. and was playing tennis at midnight because that was the only time I could. By doing a lot of things, so many different things, like putting up dry wall and carpentry, it may seem crazy but it works for me.

I read on the Metro on my way to work. It lessens the frequency of my tics and people don't stare at me on the train. In New York it seems more normal to be abnormal, but I continually realize that if I didn't know about TS I'd probably look too. It's like a car wreck—you look, but you don't have to pull your car over and stare at it.

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FAMILY PORTRAIT—JIM MERKLINGER

I also work out and sports have always been important. I come from a big sports family. I played football in college—my father and my brothers did, too. It was a great way to bond but it was also more of an identity. I'm on the softball team from Senator Frist's office and I also play rugby. But I'll be retiring soon. Some of the players are fifteen or sixteen years younger than me. I think I'm destined for the old guys team. My days might be in the past, but I try to stay in shape.

TSA: Some media presentations of TS are better than others. What do you think of the media's role in increasing awareness?

J.M.: They always focus on the extreme cases, so the media coverage is mixed. It's good that people are aware, that people have heard of it. But they may be aware while having misconceptions. They're aware it exists, but the media isn't very informative.

TSA: Any advice for kids with TS?

J.M.: Life's not perfect, but you live with it. Choose things you want to pursue. Everyone has different things—music, literature, things that help a kid focus. I wasn't just the kid who made funny noises—I was the football player who made funny noises.

I'm not saying anything new, but you learn to be a friend and you have friends. I still have a friend from when I was eight years old. And my rugby team is a nice group of guys who've recognized that I can't help the tics—they take me for who I am. ■