

Chris Laro



Chris Laro wears many hats: writer, mentor and activist. He is an award-winning filmmaker and writer and Chris has been working in the social services field for over 10 years in New Jersey and in Vermont. He is focused on mentoring troubled youth and with special-needs' adults with various disabilities. In addition, he is channeling his creative energies into his novels, one particularly close to his heart, entitled *Delcina's Tree*.

TSA: When were you diagnosed?

Chris: I was one of the first test cases for Yale University. As an adult, I got to see the old reel-to-reel tapes of me from the studies. Tourette Syndrome was mentioned when I was 8 or 9, but nobody told me it was an organic disorder. They still talked about it as psychiatric.

My parents and the doctor treating me decided it was better to treat me with talk therapy as opposed to medication. No one made me aware that my TS was something I couldn't help. I was told I was manifesting these tics out of my own stress and therefore I could control it. I spent years trying to control my TS.

I don't remember hearing, 'Chris you have Tourette Syndrome' until I was in high school. That was in 1981. I tried Haldol, but that was only once and I had severe paralysis. In all fairness, the doctors were doing the best they could. That was the only time I took medication. Everything I've done since has been holistic and natural.

TSA: What kind of impact has TS had on your life and work?

Chris: I think TS produced for me an incredible amount of isolating time. You either can become really nuts or very creative. I became inwardly creative. It gave me the ability to sit in a room and create fiction. My whole adult life is about being creative.

There's also my civic mentality. I got that from my parents, who are corporate hippies. But having TS is part of my civic minded desires. I'm involved with disabled people with reaching out to the disenfranchised.

TSA: When did you become involved with TSA?

Chris: The first film I made was when I was at the New School for Social Research. I was 18. The first place I showed it was at the South Orange, New Jersey TSA Chapter. Then we showed it at a special education teachers convention and then all over New Jersey. I gave talks in high schools and other chapters.

TSA: What was life like for you growing up?

Chris: School was brutal. I always had to temper my thoughts. I held it in for short periods of time and then I'd run amok. I went to public school, but I had to leave because of the teachers' cruelty. Then I went to a Catholic all-boys school. I became even more violent. I beat up everybody. I always had a temper and I had to fight back. When people were

cruel I felt obligated to push back to keep my self-esteem.

I was a tough kid. I wouldn't recommend it to other kids, but I had to fight back. By 8th grade I had very aggressive ways to deal with bullying. Everybody understood that I wasn't someone you could do that to and the mocking would stop.

I was a good athlete. I was popular with girls and I had good friends. But I was still always known as the kid with TS and I'd have to deal with it. My tics were waxing and waning and there was always something different every week. There is something universal about kids who are different.

My parents were very supportive. I think I got my sense of humor from them. I use humor a lot. I had coprolalia from age 8 to 11. That was tough.

TSA: Does anyone else in your family have TS?

Chris: My father and my aunt have motor tics, but no vocal tics.

TSA: As an actor and writer, what do you think of the way TS is portrayed in the media?

Chris: I have never seen any of the shows that portray TS. I avoid them. I've heard nothing but 'freak show' for most of them. In the novel, *Motherless Brooklyn*, TS was just a device to make the character more interesting. The cruel thing about TS, what you will never see in fiction, is what it's really like as a young person with

TS and the nightmare of having your body exploding that way. I haven't seen it, but I've heard that the portrayal on *Boston Legal* is pretty cool.

It's a tough disorder. Anytime you bring a disability into a fictional setting it's tough to pull off. I don't feel like it's my goal to portray TS. I don't want to write about TS. I write literary fiction. I think people who survive TS are much more interesting than anything in any fictional mythology.

TSA: Do you have any advice for kids with TS?

Chris: You cannot internalize people trying to steal your soul. It's a heavy weight concept. Don't internalize the way people make fun of you; it makes you internalize the mocking and the fear.

I want to get back to more public speaking. I've been talking with kids, teens and families. I want to offer my message to a broader audience. It's about creating your own mythology and making yourself the hero. I never looked to the media. Hemingway and my parents were my heroes. The older you get the more you realize that everybody has a fear. Nobody has the answers for a good life. And most authority figures are mediocre. There's no blueprint for success. You have to find your own way to a positive mythology. Reach down inside of yourself and find how beautiful you are. ●