

AN INSIDER'S LOOK AT THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT: ROLANDA "DOLLY" COLEMAN

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, a production of a New York State Unified Court System. I'm your host, John Caher.

Thirty-four years ago today, President George Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act, the world's first comprehensive declaration of equality for people with disabilities. Our guest today is a young woman with a very special perspective on the doors that were opened, literally, by the ADA, and a painfully special insight into the consequences of inner-city gun violence. Her name is Rolanda "Dolly" Coleman, a soon to be second year law student at Fordham Law School, who was interning this summer with the New York City Criminal Court.

Rolanda was only 17 years old and living in public housing in East New York when she was shot three times in a stairwell, paralyzing her and leaving her to navigate life in a wheelchair. The incident awakened in her a passion for law, justice, and advocacy.

Since that life-altering moment and despite a series of physical and emotional setbacks, Rolanda has earned three degrees, served as a congressional intern, led the New York State Assembly intern committee's first remote joint mock budget hearing, received a slew of awards, and says it's no coincidence that most of her greatest milestones were reached while she was in a wheelchair.

Today, we'll meet an extraordinary woman who describes herself as "ambitious, optimistic, hopeful, and determined to live life without limits."

Rolanda, thank you for coming on the program. Take us back to the moment when your life changed forever. What happened in that stairwell?

Rolanda Coleman: It was the morning of May 3rd, 2010, and I was leaving my apartment building to commute to school in Brooklyn. I recognized a neighbor of mine standing at the top of my building's second floor staircase. I was pretty puzzled by his presence. Before I could ask what he was doing there, he shot me. I was first shot in the left side of my face, right beneath my zygomatic bone. I learned that word on Jeopardy! last week. But anyway, the impact sent me flying down a flight of stairs, and the person struck me with two more bullets. One hit me on the left side of my neck and the other in my right forearm.

John Caher: Do you know why he shot you?

Rolanda Coleman: Well, it's not entirely conclusive. But two weeks or so before it happened, he and some others intimidated me to set somebody up that I knew, that I hung out with, that went to my school and lived in another section of our neighborhood, and I refused. That's the only thing that I can correlate to why this happened to me.

John Caher: Was he convicted?

Rolanda Coleman: Yes.

John Caher: I imagine you've spent some time contemplating inner city gun violence, correct?

Rolanda Coleman: Certainly. Well, recently gun violence was declared a public health crisis by the United States Surgeon General, so this is a widespread problem and it impacts our nation on a daily basis.

Between 2018 and 2019, I had planned to host a showing and discussion of artist JR and TIME Magazine's "Gun Chronicles in America." It ended up not happening but it left a great impact on me and I began being more vocal about an array of issues that affect the masses. Some of my biggest takeaways from "Gun Chronicles in America" are that there are more than 265 million guns in America, 35,000 deaths per year, and one 233-year-old constitutional right. I really enjoy constitutional law! Social, economic and political issues such as loose regulations and big corporations also play a role because they work together to make guns more easily and readily accessible. Basically, it's a cycle of inaction and profit over people.

At the same time, I think that inner city gun violence is more unique because it largely affects Black people. There's a book by Walter Thabit called *How East New York Became a Ghetto*. I cited it in one of my grad school papers and the title alone caught my attention because that's where I'm from. Anyway, Thabit described the etiology of ghetto formation and argued that the ghetto is ruled by standards and laws that are different from those of a white society. This resonated with me because I witnessed firsthand how a ghetto mindset ruins lives and I escaped falling prey to this by the grace of God.

According to the NYC Planning Population Map, East New York is home to 42,818 mostly Black residents. My academic background in history and political science opened my eyes to the social, economic, racial, and

political implications of gun violence. I became more passionate about this because it affected me personally. Plus, so many others that I know and knew have been impacted by gun violence, so it's a very important conversation and I'm grateful and blessed to be in a position that allows me to be more vocal about my experience and advocate for others especially when it comes to gun safety, policing, legislation, and personal responsibility or mindset.

John Caher: Thank you for sharing that.

So, you're in the hospital and they come to you, and they say, "Rolanda, you are paralyzed." What was your reaction?

Rolanda Coleman: I was stupefied. It felt unbelievable, and so far from anything that I could have ever imagined for myself. It was a blow to my self-esteem as a teen and absolutely one of the worst experiences of my life.

John Caher: I imagine you felt anger, maybe hatred, toward the person who shot you. Are you still angry?

Rolanda Coleman: Well, then and now, I feel an array of emotions. But a lot of time has passed so I try not to dwell on it. At the same time, it is difficult to let go of what happened, especially because I now live with a disability. I do struggle with forgiveness, but I would say that I am on a healing journey with no end in sight. I have learned to plant positive seeds and will continue to work on letting go of the past.

John Caher: Was there a turning point, an epiphany of some sort, where you were able to let go of the shock and the anger and realize that you really have no choice but to move forward?

Rolanda Coleman: Yeah. Each day built on the next. It didn't really happen overnight, but I would say that my epiphany came when I was a patient at St. Mary's Hospital for Children in Bayside. When I first sustained the injury, I was taken to Brookdale Hospital. From there, I went to Mount Sinai Hospital. The last place that I resided as a patient was at St. Mary's, and I spent the most time there. Again, it was a children's hospital, so although it was pretty early on in my journey with a disability, being around children, a lot of whom were born with chronic illnesses, died young, were younger than me at the time, unable to communicate verbally, it filled me with a sense of gratitude, and compassion, and empathy. It really helped me to stay positive and become an advocate for other people with disabilities.

John Caher: That is remarkable. Now, the years after the shooting were very difficult in other ways. It seems you endured a number of health scares. I think you were 20, you lost your mother to an asthma attack. How were you able to deal with such diversity, and how has dealing with that adversity made you the person you are today?

Rolanda Coleman: That's a great question. As a person with a background in research, I'm glad that I'm prepared to go deep and reflect on how far I've come. Moving forward, I guess it's just a part of my personality.

I know that it sounds like a really tough and sad story, but I'm not the only person who's faced trials and tribulations. I have been surrounded by strong and supportive people, including my beloved family, my aunt, my grandmother, my cousin, my brother, my community and school has played a great role in that because it allowed me to divert my attention from anything negative or just consuming any unfriendly emotions. It just made me more ambitious. It put me on a more rewarding path. Adversity is a part of life, and facing challenges has made me stronger.

John Caher: Were you always that optimistic person, that glass half full person?

Rolanda Coleman: Yeah, I was. Attitude is everything. I think I've had a very tenacious spirit even before this happened. I believe in mindset, having a positive mindset. It impacted me after this because I was able to just, like you said, continue to move forward. I was able to think about how these moments affected my life. But yeah, my attitude has been to just keep going and stay focused on the best parts of life.

John Caher: I think you were still in the hospital when you graduated from high school, and then you got an associate's degree in paralegal studies, and then you got a bachelor's in political science, and then you got a master's in history, and now you're going to law school. What motivates you to keep going? Any of those, many people wouldn't have gotten that far, and many people would've stopped after any one of those. Why does Rolanda keep going?

Rolanda Coleman: Education became a huge motivator for me because I wanted to feel useful and spend my time doing things that would be worthwhile. Education has always been important to me growing up. My grandmother and my parents, in a way, instilled in me that learning is power, and it became more necessary for me as a person with a disability. Also, as I said before, death and hardship is a part of life. No one is immune from it, so learning that early helped me deal with

adversity and prepare me for the game of life. I've gotten a little accustomed to dealing with some level of loss personally and externally.

Like you said, my mom did pass away when I was younger, but all of that helped me propel and helped me understand the value of having a second chance and living life to the fullest. Education is just great, too, mentally. It keeps me on a good path and there's always something to learn, so that is one of the most exciting parts about my journey.

John Caher: Our listeners are not going to see what I see, but I want to point it out for them. You have a big, bright, beautiful smile!

Rolanda Coleman: Thank you so much!

John Caher: What inspired you to attend law school?

Rolanda Coleman: I always wanted to be a lawyer even before I was injured, but seeing the justice system from up close and personal made me want to be a part of it. The person who shot me was sentenced to 13 years in prison and has already gained his freedom.

I find it hard to believe that justice was served. At the same time, I know that it's not up to one person to decide. Laws are the process of legislation and the culture of our society. I think that law is a great way for me to be involved and to learn more about those who implement change and how I can be a part of that, so law school just felt natural. It felt like the best path towards equality and justice and just a challenging but invigorating and rewarding learning environment. That's why I am on the path to become a lawyer.

John Caher: What kind of law do you intend to practice?

Rolanda Coleman: I get that question a lot, and sometimes I don't respond in a concrete way because I don't necessarily know what kind of law will excite me most. Since we are actually talking about myself having a disability and the legislative significance of that in regards to the ADA, I started researching a little bit about civil rights and I learned a lot about that. I would just say, at first, I was mostly interested in real estate and entertainment, things that suit my personality. It seemed fun and engaging. But then again, I started researching the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, and learned about it. That Division is carried out by 11 sections, one of which is the Disabilities Rights Section, and that is led by the Assistant Attorney General. That actually sounds like a very exciting career path.

I've also considered being a judge, maybe in family court or criminal court, being that I'm interning with the criminal court.

I would just say I can't give you a concrete answer as to what exactly I would be practicing once I graduate from law school, but I'm passionate about helping solve issues that affect the masses. That includes civil rights, disability rights, work around gun violence, and just other types of advocacy work.

John Caher: Tell me what you're doing with the court system this summer.

Rolanda Coleman: Right now, I have the pleasure of interning for the Honorable Germaine Auguste as a part of the New York City Criminal Internship Program, spearheaded by Attorney Sheridan Jack-Browne. I'm learning a lot. The judge that I'm interning for, along with the other judges, and attorneys, and court officers, and just everyone that I've met, they balance teaching with kindness and sound judgment. It's really impressive. They don't make everything about the law. They have a very holistic perspective when it comes to their one-on-one experience with each case and the people that they encounter.

The judge I'm interning for, she's a great example of a judge. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to learn from her along with others. Collectively, the staff and the internship itself, has helped me better understand the entire criminal justice system here in New York, from arrests to arraignments to summons operations, to motions, and more.

I recently visited a Community Court in Brooklyn, and I learned a lot. That was a really new and exciting experience, which touched on just how community and volunteers and lawyers and DAs and just everyone really work together to help people on either side of the criminal justice system. A lot of people who have been victims or who have served time also get a second chance to do good and to learn more. It's been really exciting, this criminal court internship.

John Caher: I'm glad you're finding it rewarding, which, of course, is the whole purpose. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Rolanda Coleman: I see myself as a graduate of Fordham Law. I see myself with the JD, of course. I see myself either working in politics or working with the court system in some way.

I'm actually visualizing the Queens Criminal Court and other criminal courts that are at 100 Centre Street that I've been to. It's not that blurry,

my vision of the future. I know that I will be nicely dressed professionally and just flourishing in some part of government or law.

John Caher: Now, I know you also like to write. Is that part of your future?

Rolanda Coleman: Absolutely, yes. I love to write. Maybe I will be close to finishing a memoir that I'm working on. The title is not confirmed, but right now, it is called *Stories of a Doll*, because that's my social media handle. I'm mostly known as Dolly, and I do have a lot of stories. It's a memoir. It's personal. I think storytelling is a beautiful thing, and it's inspiring. That's also in the works for the future.

John Caher: Sounds like an exciting future. Let's discuss the ADA, if we could, a landmark measure signed by the first President Bush in 1990. What does that mean to you and people like you? How does it affect your daily life?

Rolanda Coleman: The ADA affects my daily life because I enjoy being outside as much as any other able body young person, and it set the standard for our level of participation in life. I require accessible entrances and accommodations to enter and enjoy many public spaces. That's a big pro of that legislation. From theaters to museums, to restaurants, to sports arenas, I'm entitled to a spot at these places, thanks to the 1990 passage of the ADA.

I never realized before, "Oh, wow. This is something that I will be talking about." But at some point in life, a lot of people who never had a disability may have a disability. We never know what legislation will impact us, and this one has surprisingly impacted me a lot at this stage in my life. I will continue to advocate and talk about it because it is important.

There's a book, I was actually watching something on CUNY TV. I'm a CUNY girl, I'm a city girl. I don't recall the author but I will research it to find out, but the book is called *The Future Is Disabled*. I believe that's the title. Again, it speaks to what the future holds for people, whether they know it or not. Some people will have a disability. Nobody wants one, but you do want legislation and people who will stand up for you and listen, and listen to what you need. This legislation is really important, and it's a great time to just honor that legacy of President Bush and how it affects people like me.

John Caher: Now, obviously, the court system has to provide the reasonable accommodations required under the ADA, but what more could we and other institutions do to make life a little easier for people with disabilities?

Rolanda Coleman: The court and other institutions can start by just participating in conversations with a broad variety of individuals with disabilities to get a better sense of the community. They can conduct surveys. There's so many different types of disabilities, so there's not a one-fits-all case. There can be improved services such as Access-A-Ride and wheelchair-accessible vehicle, Ubers and taxi services. We can have improved streets and sidewalks in regards to pavement.

I have a story, of course, about my experience being in a wheelchair and how just not having smooth streets almost resulted in a fall in Long Island City. Definitely transportation—punctual, professional, comfortable transportation. Updated technology. For instance, having signs and technology that actually speak and tell you when to cross the street and correctly tell you when not to cross the street to avoid any accidents.

That would be a huge part of improving the lives of people with disabilities. I would also say equipment. Maybe that falls under technology, and places of business and institutions. I use a Hoyer lift, so I need help transferring from a bed to the wheelchair. That's basically never present in places besides hospitals. Some people, they need more intricate care and privacy, so the conversation will deepen and continue based on what others might say they need. But those are just some of the small ways that will have really big impacts and be very useful.

John Caher: You mentioned the Hoyer lift. If you go to a hotel, what happens?

Rolanda Coleman: Unless I have some very strong human who's willing to pick me up, I just have to stay in the wheelchair for a lot of hours. Sometimes training is really important too because people don't know how to help people with different disabilities.

Family members and parents of people with disabilities, they sometimes need a break too, so maybe having a place that's not a nursing home or a hospital where people may have short stays to give their relatives a break, that would be something that I will be proud to assist in and help develop.

John Caher: You must deal with hundreds of things every day that people who are not in your situation are unaware of. What do you wish people who do not have a disability better understood about those who do?

Rolanda Coleman: That's a good question, and it's a pretty easy question, and I can give an easy answer because although I do deal with things that are different, a lot of the things that I do are the same as everyone else. People without

disabilities can just show up for people with disabilities, just having, conversations, celebrating their wins, encouraging them during their battles, extending kindness and patience when someone in a wheelchair enters a city bus, not huffing and puffing because they think they're going to be five minutes or 10 minutes late to work. It's the little things that count. Extend grace, and patience, and kindness.

I mentioned before life is full of surprises. One day, I was walking, and the next day, I couldn't use my limbs. A life-altering prognosis can happen to anyone.

John Caher: Where do you think you would be today if you had not been shot?

Rolanda Coleman: I would be half as smart as I am today if that didn't happen!

It's a little difficult to imagine because I'm just on a new journey and I'm totally a different person. I mean, when I got shot, my brain wasn't even fully developed. I was 17. It's unclear where I would be, but I doubt that I would be as passionate as I am now about education. I had dreams of acting and being in the entertainment business, so maybe I could have been rapping somewhere, making music for some audience.

John Caher: Do you think, to some extent, this whole experience is getting you where you're supposed to be?

Rolanda Coleman: Oh, absolutely. My aunt reminds me of that a lot. Again, being around people who support me and encourage me, my church home, my family. I'm going to have to shout out my aunt, my beloved Aunt Karen, because she's my caretaker. She is just really the rock of my family. She makes things that would be even harder for me, so much easier. Again, the people in your life have a great impact on you. The women in my life, the Black women in my life, again, my community, my professors, they make my disability invisible. But at the same time, they help me when I need help.

My attitude is mostly positive. I'm thankful for this experience in a way because it gave me a new lease on life. It reminded me that I'm not invincible and that I can still move forward and have everything that I want despite this drastic new reality. It has been a gift and a curse in a way.

John Caher: What a beautiful statement. Thank you so much for sharing your time with me, and thank you for brightening my whole day with that big, bright smile of yours!

Rolanda Coleman: Thank you so much, John. It was a pleasure to speak with you.