

# Lessons From the Academy of Life

*Actor Robert David Hall believes and demonstrates that success can be achieved despite adversity*

by Elizabeth Bokfi

*Disability is defined as (1) a lack of adequate power, strength, physical or mental ability; (2) a physical or mental handicap, especially one that prevents a person from living a full, normal life or from holding a gainful job.*

But where is the definition for “differently abled”? For many, the term “disabled” comes with a negative connotation attached. It is easier to focus on the incapacities of disability rather than the successes achieved through adaptivity – a naturally occurring phenomenon when one becomes “disabled.” In America, of the nearly 2.5 million employed in the Federal workforce, only 5 percent of individuals with disabilities are represented. People with disabilities who are creatively inclined have even less employment opportunities. If you’re a starving artist, you have a better chance of eating if you’re beautiful, able-bodied and not disfigured in any way.

However, efforts are being made to increase awareness that people living with a disability have employment needs. *Lights! Camera! Access!* was an event held on July 10 at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in North Hollywood, California. The U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences co-hosted the event, which commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The event, a facilitator for dialogue between the Labor Department and entertainment and broadcast industries, explored strategies to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

The 20th anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act was further recognized on July 26 at an event held on the South Lawn of the White House. Addressing the audience at this event and later introducing President Obama was actor Robert David Hall, most recognized for his role as coroner Dr. Albert Robbins on CBS’ *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*.

A left below-knee and right above-knee amputee, the result of a traffic accident involving an 18-wheel truck July 10, 1978, Hall demonstrates that success *can* be achieved despite adversity. At the time of his accident, Hall was an able-bodied 30-year-old working as an early-morning DJ at KORJ-FM in Orange, California. During the daytime he worked as a radio

diabetic, Hall was familiar with disability. Despite possessing a positive perception of disability developed through his personal family experiences, nothing prepared him for the lack of accessibility in society following his accident.

“In 1978,” explains Hall, “the world was only beginning to understand that people with disabilities wanted to do the same things, and to go to the same places as everyone else. The accessibility issues that bothered me the most dealt with not being able to use bathrooms and difficulties finding parking access.”

With over 60 percent of his body severely burned, Hall also experienced periods of discrimination due to the extent of the burns suffered on his face and arms. The challenges presented by societal discrimination, occasional bouts of depression and reduced mobility only served to push Hall forward with his life plan.

“Because I was burned badly, it took a while before they were comfortable fitting me with artificial limbs,” says Hall. “My first set of prostheses were wooden. I think they believed at that point in time that wood was better for people with burns. I spent 3 months at the [University of California, Irvine Medical Center]

therapy gym getting to the point where I could walk. Everyone’s different depending on the extent of their injuries, the quality of care they receive and their own strength and will.”

Hall was able to earn a living following his accident by returning to radio work. At this time he began to consider acting.



Robert David Hall portrays Dr. Albert Robbins on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. Photo courtesy of CBS

commercial copywriter, switching to voicing radio commercials in the afternoon. Hall rounded out his busy day with a 2-hour acting class followed by an evening stint with a band, performing at a local restaurant.

Growing up with a legally blind brother, a wheelchair-using grandmother suffering from multiple sclerosis and a sister with

"I had periods of depression but was pretty intent on figuring out what I was able to do, as opposed to lamenting what I *couldn't* do," explains Hall. "I spent a total of 8 months in the hospital at different times. There were times when it felt like it would never end. I had some great people around me and I worked quite hard to learn how to walk on my prostheses. I also had the goal of getting back to work in my chosen field and spent a lot of time figuring out how that was possible."

Vocalizing his desire to become an actor to his then-wife and friends was, in his opinion, not met with support. "Some suggested I'd taken leave of my senses. I think they were trying to protect me from rejection. I'm half Irish and pretty stubborn. When people tell me I can't do something, I want to do it!"

Hall's career as a performer in the visual arts began in the most unlikely of places. An invitation from a disabled friend led to attention.

"I had taken several acting classes at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) in the early '70s, but I actually went on my first acting audition on a lark. Actor Alan Toy invited me to a "cattle-call" audition at Warner Brothers. I didn't get the job, but I attracted some notice."

Auditioning twice for *CSI*, Hall landed his first role as Dr. Albert Robbins on the series' sixth episode of the first season. Meant only to be a one-time shoot, the role of Dr. Robbins was extended through an additional 16 episodes, becoming a series regular at the start of the second season.

Addressing October's National Disability Employment Awareness Month, Hall is a strong supporter. "I've supported it forever and have lent my name and my time to the cause. There are huge gaps in employment statistics between able-bodied and qualified people with disabilities. It's tough for anyone to find work these days, but people with disabilities have been experiencing obstacles in their search for work for many decades. In whatever way I can, I want to help draw attention to the fact that there are

me to finish my songs and record them. I spent about 4 weeks writing, rehearsing and recording the album. I had some great Austin musicians on the project, which was engineered by Merel Bregante, a great musician and spirit."

Hall has always turned to music for strength, inspiration and solace. He recalls listening to albums while in the hospital. Keeping a journal at the time following his accident, there were lines from his journal that

eventually found their way into his songs, years later.

Setting aside Dr. Robbins, *CSI* and performing music, Hall still experiences the same health issues as other amputees. When asked about his special needs and the effect they have on his daily work commitments, he feels fortunate.

"...Skin breakdown, phantom pains, etc. – some times they're manageable, other times I visit my prosthetist or doctor. I've been fortunate that, even when it's been severe, I've never missed work. I think my current employers at CBS would understand if

I needed time off but ... most actors and performers really believe 'the show must go on.' We're a little paranoid."

An example of success to the able-bodied community, and an inspiration to other performing artists who might be living differently abled, Hall continues to enjoy favorable reviews. In addition to a successful acting career and with performances on Nashville's Grand Ole Opry and national television under his belt, Hall hopes to continue writing, singing and playing for the rest of his life. ■

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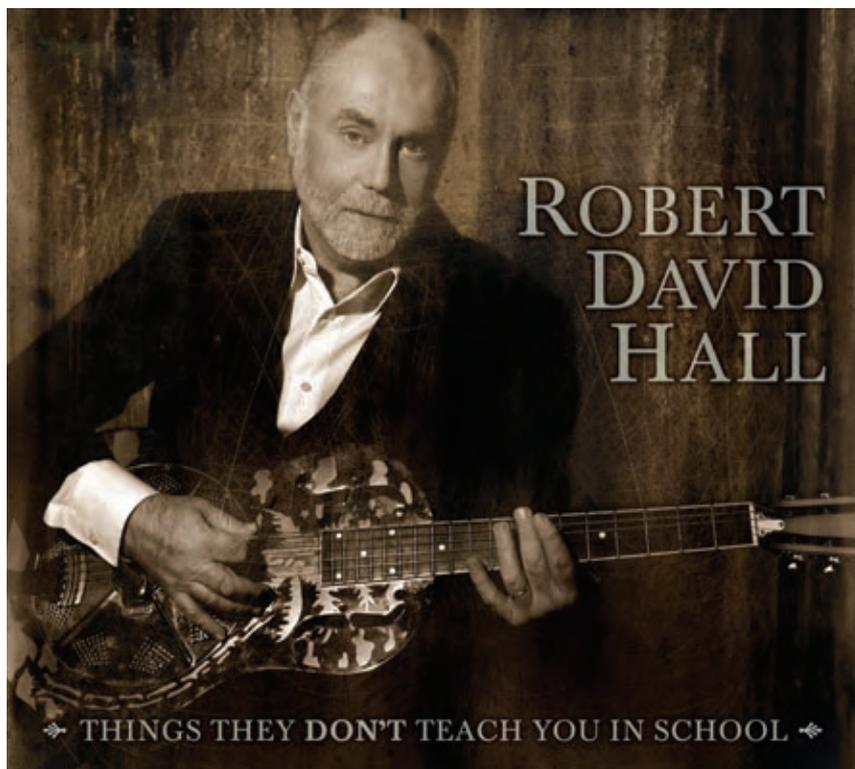


Photo courtesy of Robert David Hall Music

many people with disabilities out there at every level of the employment ladder. We deserve a chance to take part in every aspect of American life. It's great to earn a paycheck as well."

And take part he does. The UCLA graduate and actor is also an accomplished musician, releasing his first CD, *Things They Don't Teach You in School*, this summer.

"[It has] been a labor of love. I've always been a journal writer and closet songwriter. I never had the confidence to finish my own songs and record them. About 3 years ago, my youngest brother, Steven Hall, was diagnosed with liver cancer. He's doing pretty well now, but Steve encouraged