



Gary Coleman – The Untold Story

He was the most famous child star in modern times. Entertainment legends Bob Hope and Lucille Ball pronounced him a “genius.” For nearly a decade, a seriously ill juvenile actor made millions laugh, and earned a fortune in the process. But by age 21, his career was finished and most of his wealth squandered.

Gary Coleman and his parents were America’s Number One African-American family in the early 1980’s. Yet, the rewards and fame of being the star of a hit television series took a toll. As Gary reached his late teens, anger about being type-cast, missing revenues and a taxing medical condition, caused the erosion of his celebrity and glory. Ultimately, Gary’s world collapsed and family dissolved, never to mend. As an adult, Gary Coleman was a bitter has-been. What happened?



SGC@sgco.biz / 310-422-8098 / 212-420-8800

©2011 The Stuart Goldman Co. / SGC

Gary Coleman – The Untold Story

Treatment for a Television Motion Picture

ACT I

2005. Gary Coleman is changing planes in Vancouver. It's been 20 years since filming the last episode of "Different Strokes," the hit TV series that made Gary Coleman a household name. The once brilliant child star is morose and bloated from an on-going struggle with chronic kidney disease and a long-faded career. Now in his mid-30's, Gary gets only occasional work in B-movies and low-level personal appearances. He is often forced to work odds jobs, such as a security guard, just to survive. Gary has developed a reputation in his adult life for being angry with the world, prone to aggressive outbursts. On a recent talk show, he even tried to punch the female host when he didn't like a question.

In the airport coffee shop, Gary is thrilled to see a familiar face: his former agent Vic Perillo. It's been ages since they spoke. Vic was with Gary at the start of his childhood career, only to be dumped when Gary grew disillusioned with Hollywood and everyone around him in his late teens.

Gary sits with Vic and recalls his glory days with sadness and a curious perplexity. They were once at the top. But then it came crashing down. Gary shakes his head and asks, "What happened?"

1978. Vic Perillo leads 10-year-old Gary Coleman and his parents Willy and Sue into the executive offices at NBC Studios in Los Angeles. At a huge conference table sit top producer Norman Lear, network president Fred Silverman, and seasoned actor Conrad Bain. Lear pitches a concept about a rich white Manhattanite who adopts two African-American kids. Lear wants Gary to play the younger brother. On Lear's cue, precocious little Gary launches into a hilarious scene with Conrad. Gary's timing, delivery and priceless expressions make quite an impression on Silverman. Six episodes of "Different Strokes" are ordered, completely skipping the pilot.

Gary and his parents return to their working-class home north of Chicago to pack. Gary beams, "We're going to Hollywood!" That night Sue, a nurse, tells Willy she's worried a TV series may be too much for their sick son. Their only child has required special care every day since he was diagnosed with nephritis as a baby, a serious kidney defect. The truth is, Gary almost died

several times as a young child. He's had three major operations including a kidney transplant before age six. Willy comforts Sue, and tells her Gary will be fine ...they'll just keep a close eye on their son...as always.

"Different Strokes" gets mixed reviews on NBC. But Fred Silverman, who has taken the project under his wing, believes Gary's character will save the show. He's right. The ratings soon take off and "Strokes" becomes NBC's top series. In his first major magazine interview, Gary wryly tells People Magazine, "We've got a 35 share, but it's not the greatest show in the world." Conrad Bain thinks Gary's acting ability is "exceptional," his timing like no other actor he's ever seen.

Gary's parents along with agent Vic Perillo set up professional services for the new Gary Coleman franchise: an accountant Anita deThomas; lawyers Harry Sloan and Larry Kuppin; and a publicist Larry Goldman. The new team will handle details of Gary's finances and career. Willy and Sue receive 20% of his income as personal managers. They instruct Anita to invest the rest for Gary's future. And rightly so; the young actor's salary quickly goes from \$1600 to \$25,000 per episode. Gary's parents marvel proudly as his popularity soars, hoping they're making the right decisions.

ACT II

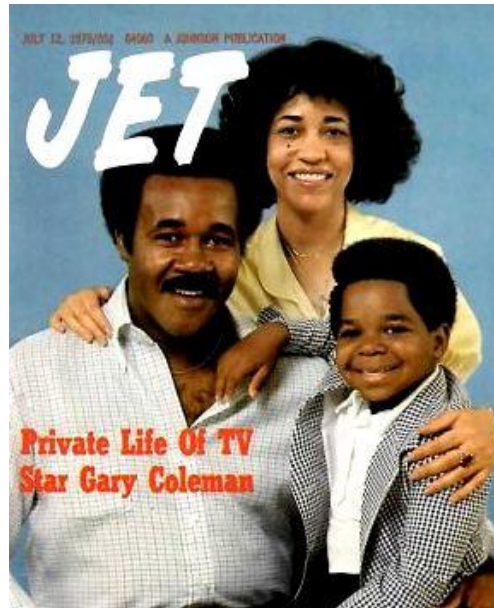
Different Strokes is renewed for a second season. Gary has become the most famous child star on television, an achievement made even more extraordinary given his on-going ordeal with kidney disease. Gary becomes the Honorary Gift of Life Chairman for the National Kidney Foundation. He makes appearances at fund-raising events and delivers endearing ad lib speeches to everyone's delight. Smaller than other kids his age, he can barely be seen over the podium.

Medication has stunted Gary's growth—which turns out to be a plus for his much younger character. Gary seems unbothered by the inconvenience of his medical problem; he is thrilled to famous. Praised as a young "genius," he remains humble. He tells reporters, "I try to understand people who are not as smart as me and not be hateful." Indeed, Gary seems to like everyone he meets, and the public adores him.

Willy continues to work part time, commuting back and forth from Chicago, while Sue stays in Los Angeles with Gary. The whole family writes a biography book together, called "Medical

Miracle,” celebrating their life stories but focusing on the young star’s remarkable success, against all odds. It becomes a best-seller.

Gary gives much credit for his career to his parents. He explains, “My mother is my strength.” “And my father, we’re very close now. It’s like his spirit has become part of me.” Sue remarks, “His talent may well be God’s compensation for what he’s been through.”



A production company is formed to make movies starring Gary during summer down-time. One day, taking a break from shooting in New York, Gary takes a tour of the United Nations. When Secretary of State Madeline Albright spots him in the balcony, she brings him down to the front of the chamber and introduces him to the general assembly. Gary Coleman smiles broadly at the delegates. He is truly sitting on top of the world.

ACT III

Several years later. Accountant Anita DeThomas is on the phone with the bank. She’s confirming a wire transfer from Gary’s account to a third party. She is buying a business in Beverly Hills. Sloan and Kuppin have drawn up the documents for this sale, one of many ventures engineered by DeThomas. Sue and Willy are made aware of the deal and they approve,

believing it's all a good investment for Gary's money. At this point, Gary is earning over \$1 million annually.

Meanwhile, Gary has just won the People's Choice Award for the fourth year in a row as Favorite Young TV Performer. Things are heating up on the set. Most of the cast, especially veteran actor Conrad Bain and co-star Todd Bridges, have grown to resent Gary's stardom and salary. Conrad who plays Gary's surrogate father and Todd, his older brother, are both envious and can't hide it. They are often rude to Gary and treat him with disrespect. They also can't stand Willy and Sue who are always hanging around. Conrad Bain believes they try to be too controlling. He and Todd, now 18, even wonder if they might be stealing his millions. Gary just shrugs it off negatively in his typical optimistic fashion. He jokes, if they're not going to be nice, he'll just go to lunch with his new pal Dion Mail who likes him a lot. Dion's an older boy who was an extra in one of Gary's movies. Dion was recently hired as Gary's personal assistant. He and Gary make a striking pair: Dion's tall, a Michael Jackson look-alike, in contrast to Gary's pint-size. Dion seems drawn to Gary out of a longing for fame—he's also an aspiring performer. Gary appears drawn to Dion because he's physically what Gary can never be.

That night at a dinner party hosted by his agent Vic Perillo, Gary meets some of Vic's beautiful actress clients who are infatuated with the cute and witty young star. Gary is shy and polite around the attractive young women. Yet, he doesn't seem interested in their obvious attraction to him. He later confides to Vic, he believes "no girl would want me" because of his stunted growth and scars from surgeries.

Willy and Sue Coleman like and trust Dion. He is well-mannered and considerate and thinks the world of Gary. When Gary asks his folks if he can get his own apartment in Beverly Hills, his parents say OK even though he's only 16. That is, providing Dion will be Gary's roommate and full-time companion. Willy and Sue feel they count on Dion to take good care of young Gary who has to constantly monitor and attend to his kidney condition.

In the new place, Gary sets up an elaborate model train complex winding through the apartment. In the evening, he and Dion go out to dinner or watch TV. Late at night, Gary writes poetry and draws detailed cartoon books featuring fantasy super-heroes, projecting a "he-man" strength and daring that he lacks. He secretly longs to be more like other young men his age.

"Different Strokes" is renewed for a sixth season. Tensions on set remain high. One day Willy hears Gary yelling in his dressing room. Todd Bridges has Gary pinned to the floor and is hitting

him. Willy pulls him off. Years of animosity between the Gary and less-famous Todd have come to a head. Filming is cancelled for the day. Gary asks his father what he should do about handling the situation. Willy tells him to hold his head up...and have faith in God. Gary doesn't think that's useful advice.

Gary meets with Vic to tell him that working on the show is no fun anymore. He wants out, despite a salary now approaching \$100,000 per episode. Gary's just turned 17. Larry Goldman draws up the press announcement that Gary Coleman will not return to "Different Strokes." When asked why he quit, he tells the press, "Any teenager is going to want to take control of his life." He's searching for new ways to express himself. Willy and Sue, supportive and approving as always, go along with Gary's desire to quit. They don't care about the money; they have never wanted to live in a "wealthy" lifestyle. But his parents don't seem to grasp what's really going on with Gary.

ACT IV

With "Strokes" behind them, Vic seeks new production deals. Gary himself is full of ideas. He wants to do more "mature" projects. In one concept, he's visualizes himself as a "storm-trooper." But Hollywood isn't interested in hiring a small actor once famous for playing a child—and certainly not playing "hero" roles. Gary is confronted with the reality of show business—and his own life predicament. He's growing up but everyone still sees him as a child—the public *and* the industry. He's beginning to realize he will never become the actor he wants to be.

Gary becomes depressed. He starts to "bad-mouth" the industry. He tells the press he thinks the idiots in the television business are only interested in the "tried and true" formulas. In a candid and sobering confession during a television interview, he says he feels that his "future" is behind him.

Searching for direction, Gary's bond with Dion grows stronger. At this point, Gary is needy and vulnerable. Although some suspect they may be involved in a homosexual relationship together, that's not the case. Dion is like the big brother that Gary never had and Dion wants to be there for him.

Dion's mother Terri also befriends Gary, spending more time at the apartment. She sees how much Gary likes and trusts her son, and schemes to take advantage of Gary's vulnerability in

some way. Terri tells Gary that the people around him are liars and thieves—including his parents. Where is your fortune? she asks him. Gary starts to wonder about the people he has trusted for so long.

Gary looks into his finances. Anita DeThomas, his accountant, doesn't seem to know exactly where a lot of his money is invested. When asked about the business she bought in Beverly Hills with his money, she says it's gone bankrupt. Gary wonders what other bad investments she has made.

Terri and Dion start pushing Gary to do something about the mismanagement of his finances. Terri sees an "in", and convinces Dion that they must work to take control of Gary's career—for his own good. Terri reminds Gary he was adopted; how could he possibly trust people who aren't his real parents? And his management team...what happened to his fortune and career? Terri tells Gary that she and Dion are more concerned for his well-being than his parents and the people around him, and Gary believes them. Gary begins to think that his own parents have not done a good job protecting him and his interests.

ACT V

Vic has just found two new projects for Gary that will move him into more mature roles: a TV detective pilot and a series, *Juvenile Judge*. Gary says they can discuss it but not for two weeks. He and Dion are on the way to Hawaii for a vacation together.

Gary goes *incommunicado* for the entire trip. Upon his return, he calls a meeting with Sue, Vic and Anita. At the office with Dion, Gary solemnly announces he no longer wants to work; Vic needs to remove him from all planned projects. When Vic says they risk a lawsuit because of an agreement already signed with Fries Entertainment, Dion yells that Vic should respect Gary's wishes. Gary doesn't care about the consequences...he claims that he wants to get out of show business.

Vic gets a letter from AFTRA. It seems that Gary has recorded a non-union rap song with Dion, bizarrely titled *The Outlaw and the Indian*. Vic confronts Gary, Terri, and Dion about it. Gary defends making a record with his best friend. Terri then proclaims she's handling all of Gary's affairs going forward. Gary tells Vic the Mials are his family now and he wants Terri to be his new agent. Vic is fired. He has been with Gary for over 10 years.

Sue and Willy confront Gary. Why is he doing this? He says they have not been good parents to him. Sue fears Gary's long-term medications are to blame for his behavior. Patients with chronic kidney disease often become bitter adults according to the doctors, she explains in a meeting with Willy and Vic. Gary is looking to blame someone for his illness. Sue feels that while in Hawaii, Dion convinced Gary to make a complete break, with Terri's encouragement.

Gary doesn't really want to get out of show business. He just thinks making a brand new start will somehow transform him into a different person and bring him the life he longs for. This of course can never be.

February 8, 1989. Entertainment Tonight is reporting from Chasen's Restaurant in Beverly Hills. It's Gary Coleman's 21st birthday. Celebrities go in and out of the bash. The reporter remarks that it's a bitter-sweet occasion. All of Gary's friends are at the party—but not his parents. In fact, he's suing them...along with business manager Anita DeThomas. He believes they're responsible for losing most of his money. The reporter asks Gary why he cut off his parents so abruptly. He snaps back "I blame my parents for not telling me how to handle my life better! They were supposed to protect me!"

At home in Illinois, Willy and Sue watch the humiliating segment on TV, surrounded by family photos. For a moment, the screen flashes back to 6-year-old Gary in his first TV commercial for Harris Bank with dozens of teddy bears falling on his little head. They are heartbroken. In the ET report, Terri Mail is explaining to the press, "As Gary's agent, I'm trying to help Gary understand his life...not what his parents want him to think."

In a courtroom, Gary listens to the judge's pronouncement. Anita DeThomas is found guilty of mishandling Gary's finances; millions were lost in deals gone bad. Gary's parents are reprimanded for using bad judgment in managing their son's affairs but are not held culpable. Gary still thinks they did him wrong.

Transition. Back at the airport lounge, 30-something Gary gazes at Vic holding back tears. Gary sees the tragedy of his life clearly. His career was never revived. His millions are gone. He has barely spoken with his parents in the past 15 years. He tells Vic he's sorry for the bad blood he created. Why was he so vindictive? Now he has accepted his fate. Vic, like a long-lost uncle, suggests to Gary that it's not too late.

2010. The news of Gary Coleman's death is the top story. Willy and Sue Coleman are on the phone with Vic Perillo quietly discussing what to do. As they speak about Gary's heartbreaking final days, and the fact that they have been denied access to his remains by Gary's widow.

Tabloids pronounce Gary's life a "Circus"...with barely a mention of his celebrated childhood career. What a story they were missing.



Production.

SGC has secured the exclusive co-operation of Gary Coleman's parents and former manager. The Colemans have agreed to open their archives to SGC for this production including never-published family photo albums, home movies, memorabilia, Gary's cartoon books and poetry, and other proprietary items.

Exclusive Interviews (confirmed):

Willy Coleman (father)

Sue Coleman (mother)

Vic Perillo (former agent)

Possible Interviews (we have contact to these individuals via Vic Perillo):

Norman Lear

Fred Silverman

Al Burton (Executive Producer for Norman Lear)

Bob Morones (Norman Lear's casting director who spotted Gary in Chicago)

Eve Brandstein (Casting Director for Norman Lear)

Shavar Ross (actor from Different Strokes)

Sharon Cooper (Gary's original agent at Chicago's A Plus Agency)

Others tbd

The Stuart Goldman Co. (SGC) has initiated and/or produced many award-winning television biography films including "Elvis in Hollywood," "Leona Helmsley: The Queen of Mean," "Alberta Hunter: My Castle's Rockin'" and "Becoming Barack: Evolution of a Leader."