

Rebuilding the speaker I used to be.

From Tragedy to Triumph

Ever since I was a little girl, I've loved public speaking. It came naturally to me. It took me across the globe – from sharing my experiences as an exchange student in Japan to attending college in London. As a student at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, I regularly spoke in front of large groups as a member of the Student Center Programming Board. Getting up to speak in front of a crowd was easy for me, and I relished every opportunity!

My ability to speak before others literally came to a screeching halt shortly after I began my senior year. Four sorority sisters and I were returning to Ball State after spending the day at another campus. Our driver lost control of the vehicle, and it was hit from behind by a speeding Freightliner semi-tractor. While the two girls in the front seat were able to unbuckle themselves and walk away from the crash, the three of us in the back seat weren't so lucky. Two friends, riding unbuckled, were instantly killed. I was the only survivor from the back seat.

Awaking from a coma six days after the crash, I was shocked by the changes. I had to prepare for a new lifestyle. I had sustained a traumatic brain injury, resulting in substantial memory loss. In addition, the right-hand side of my body was paralyzed, my right lung had collapsed, and I had no control over

my bodily functions. Damage to a vocal cord left me unable to speak at first. Once a confident and ambitious young college student, I now spent my days in a wheelchair, enduring the humiliation of wearing adult diapers. My self-esteem and confidence plummeted like stock values in a market crash.

It was a long, slow path to recovery, but a year and a half later, I was able to finish college. Wanting to fully regain my self-confidence, I contacted our local chapter of ThinkFirst, a brain and spinal cord injury prevention organization, and volunteered as a speaker. My first presentation was awful. I had to speak sitting at a desk at the front of a class of high schoolers, reading from note cards because my memory was so poor. I questioned whether public speaking was the right choice for me.

Later, a friend asked me to present the keynote speech at a conference for college financial aid administrators. I jumped at the chance, though wondered whether I could once again speak in front of a large crowd. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to practice before a group of co-workers prior to the conference. One was a Toastmaster, who evaluated my presentation and suggested a few areas for improvement. He encouraged me to join a Toastmasters group where I could polish my skills.

His comments gave me hope. Determined to speak without using notes, I practiced and videotaped the presentation until the repetition overcame my memory problems. The conference keynote went well. I was so excited!

Then one day, my employer, State Auto Insurance, announced it would start a Toastmasters club, and I became a charter member. As I completed my manual speeches, I gained more confidence in myself and my abilities. Table Topics scared me at first because it seemed to take forever for my brain to retrieve and organize information for a response. Repeated practice paid off! On my most recent Table Topics speech, I not only answered the question, but provided three points as support. This was a big deal for me. I didn't think it was possible, with my brain injury, to think on my feet and give an organized answer.

Over the past few years, I've also been able to put my Table Topics experience to the test. Due to my status as an unbuckled backseat survivor in a fatal car crash, my testimony was requested in support of a new seatbelt law introduced in the Indiana legislature during four consecutive legislative sessions. This new law would require seatbelt usage in every position of a vehicle, including trucks and SUVs, with a few exceptions. To say that it was

difficult to stand in front of the crowded Senate and House of Representative chambers to share my experience would be an understatement. Not only did I have to persuade legislators to support my point of view on this controversial bill, I had to answer questions from them on the spot. Thanks to my Table Topics experience in Toastmasters, I was able to think quickly on my feet and provide an answer that also reinforced why they should support the new bill. The new seatbelt law was finally passed during the 2007 legislative session, and I was extremely excited to have played a role in helping to save lives and prevent injuries similar to mine as a result of not wearing a seatbelt.

My Toastmaster experience has taken me back to areas where I feel most comfortable, which is speaking in front of large audiences. Recently, I've been invited to serve as the keynote speaker for seminars, conferences, and meetings for corporations, non-profits and associations. I'm excited to not only share my personal story but also impart some easy-to-understand methods for surviving and thriving through any challenge one may face in everyday life.



This summer, I was the keynote speaker at a luncheon attended by that co-worker who had steered me to Toastmasters. I asked if he would evaluate me once again. At the conclusion of my multi-media presentation, he had a big smile on his face. In his evaluation, he wrote, "I have to say this presentation is lightyears ahead of the one I saw a few years ago."

Thank you, Toastmasters, for helping me regain my lost confidence. Any tarnish left by my brain injury has been polished away. Once again, speaking comes naturally to me! ☺

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