

Our lives become richer when public speakers share their stories



BARB GUY

I watched several people tackle the famously scary realm of public speaking recently. They all have my respect. Some were kids new to giving speeches, others were seasoned adults; they were all speaking from their hearts. They all said something worth hanging onto.

On a recent Tuesday, six high school seniors had a daunting assignment: taking turns speaking to a few hundred adults at a hotel luncheon. The students were appearing before the Salt Lake Rotary Club, thanking the group for scholarships. The kids told the group about their lives. They graciously thanked the scholarship committee, their teachers, parents, and mentors.

One student, Raquel Lopez, told of coming to live in the United States, in Utah, as a 9-year-old immigrant, knowing no English. She described the terror of being

new, being ostracized by cliquish kids with everything in common, and the many other challenges she faced over several years. Finally she was welcomed and encouraged at Horizonte, an alternative school, where she excelled.

Raquel, brimming with emotion, thanked her parents, particularly her father who was in attendance, for a lifetime of loving support. All the preparation for her speech gave way to tears and a deadly-quiet pause in her remarks. But Raquel composed herself and honored her father with words of thanks in their native language. He rushed forward to embrace her at the podium.

This girl had more than a few Rotarians using their linen napkins to dab away tears. Everyone was impressed with her honesty, her earnest effort and her sweet respectful attitude toward her dad. She and all her fellow scholarship recipients were eloquent and bright.

That Thursday, Jeff Metcalf amazed me with his remarks at a University of Utah College of Humanities function, Humanities Happy Hour. As a college professor, Jeff regularly speaks to groups, but he crossed into heroic new territory with a public talk that included frank descriptions of his cancer

treatment. The Cancer Diaries: A Comedy About Cancer was, as promised, hilarious, and only partly because it was delivered while he was wearing a hospital gown.

"I've become sort of a poster child, if you will, for prostate cancer," Jeff said. "It's not something that men talk about. If I go under the knife, what if I come out a Republican? There are some things you can't be cured of."

Jeff educated people and made us laugh at the same time with comments like this one: "Get a PSA test - it's just a blood test; you don't have to study for it. If anybody wants, later, we can do PSAs. I've got a rubber glove; I can check you. Actually I can take your prostate out now, I just need a spoon."

Anyone who can find a way to laugh about cancer ought to be automatically allowed to survive it.

On Friday I went to Franklin Elementary's sixth-grade graduation. Ilaisaane Uaisele was one of the graduating speakers.

Ilaisaane echoed the school's motto, saying that she had learned to be, "respectable, responsible, and remarkable." She said, "I'd like to thank my teachers for not giving up on me

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and I'd like to thank Ms. Cordova [the principal] because she showed me that I am a person of beauty."

I also heard Geralyn Dreyfous speak when she was honored with the 2005 Distinguished Humanities Award at the Utah Humanities Council's Gala.

Geralyn is executive director of the Salt Lake City Film Center and winner of an honest-to-God Academy Award. By the time I was seated in the audience to hear Geralyn's remarks, I had been thinking quite a bit about all these speakers. The people who stand before us, in a crowded room, in front of a microphone, their hearts pounding, have a story to tell us.

Geralyn's thoughts helped me put it all into perspective. She said, "I believe that civilizations are defined by the stories that we tell - and those stories are what make us human."

She told some of her story: She arrived in Utah as a long-time East Coast resident, curious to understand her new home.

"I listened to stories," she said. "Stories from Jack Gallivan and my father-in-law about downtown in its heyday; stories from feisty 80-year-old women in the Cottonwood Garden Club; stories about fields that are now strip malls instead of horseback trails; stories about Maurice Abravanel and the bar

he raised for musical literacy; stories from Reverend France Davis about what it was like to be Baptist in the land of Zion."

Geralyn added, "Utah gave me the time, space, sanction and even permission to dare to become a storyteller - and for that I can only be grateful."

I'm grateful to the people who dare to step to the lectern, conquer their fears and share a bit of themselves with us. When we accept the stories that others offer, our own lives can become larger and more colorful; their stories get woven into our story.

Barb Guy is a frequent contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.