

Learning the true power of public speaking

BY CAROLEE KOLVE

Special to the Hermiston Herald

In my junior year in high school, my mother fashioned herself as my college admissions coach. She decreed that I needed something besides grades and SAT scores. I needed to become a school leader. "No athletic skill, no musical talent, only mundane summer jobs," she told me, shaking her head sadly.

"But no track record for leadership either," I said. "Yet," she replied.

To make it more improbable, I had just switched from a small girls' school to a large public school. Not only did I know no one, but I regularly came home from school in tears because I had eaten lunch by myself. How was I to transition from pathetic loner to school leader?

It was my junior year, and I took a stab. I ran for the lowest possible office: student body secretary. And lost. My entire campaign consisted of two posters. If anyone even saw them, they were certainly not persuaded to "Take a chance with Carolee Nance." A slogan that was neither aspirational nor inspirational, although it did rhyme. My father later explained that I had dodged a poetic bullet. In his day, kids had chanted, "Nance has ants in his pants."

But my senior year, there was another election. This time my mother said, "This is your last hope, so you have to run for something which involves giving a speech."

"Huh? I've never given a speech and I am terrified to even speak up in class."

My mother decreed that I would be a natural. A natural? She had only ever given one speech herself, so how did she know?

She assured me she knew everything there was to know about speech-making as she had just purchased "The Art of Public Speaking" by Dale Carnegie. Of course, she hadn't read it yet.

But first I had to decide what to run for. It had to be either student body president or girls' vice president. Student body president was too long a shot, so I chose girls' VP. The girls' veep also was president of the Girls' League, a loose organization of all the girls in the school. So far, no one seemed to know what this body of females actually did.

I figured out that I needed some ideas, so I polled the girls I had gotten to know. Between us, we determined that a body of several hundred young women could probably do some significant things, and so far they were just an idle clump of girls. I asked everyone, "What would you enjoy doing?" I heard ideas about school dances, good deeds in the community, ways to raise money. I thought back to the girls' school I had just left — their traditions and activities.

I tested ideas on other girls. People nodded and smiled. My confidence was nudging up!

And then I learned about my competition.

I only had one opponent. She was the most popular girl in the school. She was in an elite club of other popular girls, who were all promoting her campaign. She was beautiful, slender, with stylish clothes and cascades of dark wavy hair. The week after the upcoming election was a school dance, and somehow everyone knew she would be attending with the handsome football and baseball star who was about to be elected Student Body President. Clearly, they were the "star couple." Two dazzling winners in a sea of also-rans.

Undaunted, my mother began my speech coaching, paraphrasing loosely from Dale Carnegie, or at least from the table of contents. There were some rules, but mostly it seemed to be common sense: 1. Know your audience; 2. Engage them; and 3. Give them a reason to vote for you.

I had some good ideas and wrote my speech with actual confidence. I practiced. I smiled. I made eye contact with my imaginary audience. My dog, Heidi, listened attentively. Perhaps she only

feigned interest? My cat hid under the couch.

On the big day, I put on my best pleated skirt and white sweater. I attempted to deal with my wild hair, kinked up from ill-considered pin curls. Oh well. I grabbed my speech and my attention-getting prop, and off I went.

As we arrived, the candidates gathered on stage. I looked around, and my jaw dropped.

My opponent was dressed in the most dazzling outfit I had ever seen. A tight sweater and skirt made entirely of pink angora. As she walked the little tufts of fluff floated and waved all around her. She looked like some sort of pink fuzz goddess.

The assembly began, and she was asked to go first. She stepped to the podium, and she said: "The purpose of these speeches is for you to hear us speak and see what we look like. So first ... I'll show you what I look like."

With that, she left the podium, went to center stage, held her arms out like a ballerina, and did a slow rotation. As she moved, her angora fluffs swayed in the spotlight. She was impossibly graceful, gorgeous, and the boys went crazy. They stomped and cheered, creating additional breezes for her waving fuzz.

Finally, she returned to the podium and read the speech that no one would ever remember.

My turn. I pulled out my "attention getter," a bunch of bananas, and said, "The Girls League is not just a bunch of girls clumped together like these bananas." I smiled, and I felt a connection like I had never felt before. All my jitters disappeared, and I never had to look at my notes. I shared ideas with them, and I knew they were listening. Everyone was smiling, and I was on top of the world. I was also pretty sure of the outcome.

My opponent was gorgeous, and the boys loved her. But she had overlooked the first rule of public speaking. The audience rules.

Because, of course, for Girls' League president? Only the girls voted.

Anyone can write

Nearly 40 years in the business have taught me that readers are bombarded and overwhelmed with facts. What we long for, though, is meaning and a connection at a deeper and more universal level.

And that's why the Hermiston Herald will be running, from time to time, stories from students who are in my writing class, which I've been teaching for the past 10 years in Portland.

I take great satisfaction in helping so-called nonwriters find and write stories from their lives and experiences. They walk into my room believing they don't have what it takes to be a writer. I remind them if they follow their hearts, they will discover they are storytellers.

As we all are at our core.

Some of these stories have nothing to do with Hermiston or Umatilla County. They do, however, have everything to do with life.

If you are interested in contacting me to tell me your story, I'd like to hear from you.

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Tom Hallman Jr. is a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer for The Oregonian newspaper. He's also a writing coach and has an affinity for Umatilla County.



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Saturday, Aug. 27th
Starts at 9:00pm
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Who: Boardman Ambulance, Boardman Fire Rescue, Boardman Police Department Time: 6pm to 8pm
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In Collaboration with Boardman Chambers
End of Summer Fireworks Celebration.
Fireworks start at 9pm



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