Opening Doorways to Men's Health: TEDxTysons 2019

I grabbed a bucket list item by the ball(s): a TEDx Talk

January 27, 2020 By Justin Birckbichler

Since being thrust into this cancer advocacy and awareness space, I've set one overarching goal each year. In 2017, my goal was to survive cancer. A simple and obvious goal, yes, but one that needed to be accomplished. Since I'm writing this, that goal has clearly been achieved.

2018 was the year of research. I wanted to learn as much as I could about men's health, including what the Cleveland Clinic and CACTI found. I also spearheaded my research survey to find out what really happens with testicular exam education. In 2019, I wanted to bring those goals together — my story of survival and how it sparked this men's health crusade.

I set a very lofty goal: Deliver a TEDx talk by the end of the year. Luckily, there are three TEDx events within a reasonable distance from my house. However, as any of my friends can tell you, I am horrendous at doing things on time, and missed the application deadline for two of them.

I then came across TEDxTysons, and felt a spark of connection.

I filled out my application and followed it up with an email, hoping I wasn't too late.

To make a long story short, I wasn't. I had a phone interview with two of the three founders, Ashwood Heffern and Josh Stillman. On the call, I outlined my personal journey and my vision for the proposed talk. A few days later, I got an email from them, congratulating me on being accepted as one of fourteen speakers for TEDxTysons: Doorways 2019.

Not to brag (who am I kidding, I entirely want to brag here), but after the event, Ashwood told me I was one of only two applicants chosen from a pool over over 130. The other twelve speakers were sought out by the TEDxTysons team or won through other audition processes. I felt so honored and humbled when he told me that.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Soon after the initial email, I was paired with my speaking coach, Kate DesRosier. Over the next two and a half months, we would work together to craft a compelling talk that would be a catalyst for discussion… and get a ton of likes on YouTube.

A fun fact about me is that I write differently than I speak. While both involve humor and

education, the specific word choice and cadence changes between the two modalities. Case in point — that last sentence is something I would never say aloud. Kate suggested I make a brief outline of I wanted to address and record myself talking about those points. From there, I took the recordings and transcribed them into a workable script.

Instead of reading words I wrote, I was writing the words I spoke.

Once that was squared away, Kate and I worked to finesse the talk. I will say without hesitation that she helped me find the best version of the talk. While my overarching ideas remained the same throughout the process, she provided invaluable feedback on organization, pacing, and delivery. From start to finish, there were roughly four evolutions of the talk, each better than the last.

I spent a ton of time practicing. For a roughly ten minute talk, practicing at least twice daily, I figure I spent over 24 hours of my life rehearsing. That is a lot of ball jokes that still managed to make me laugh each time.

Finally, the day of TEDxTysons arrived.

I was in the evening session, so I got to listen to all of the speakers from the morning session. While I cannot come close to doing justice to each of the speakers talks, here are my brief snippets of wisdom I gleaned from each.

We began with Susan McCorkindale, who shared her story of grief. After losing her husband, and reflecting on how her father handled the loss of his father, she realized that when it comes to grief, we shouldn't run from it. Rather, we must use it to grow.

Josh Hotsenpiller started a company to gather the collective wisdom of some of the world's most successful people. From there, he shared his framework for wisdom. Drawing a parallel to wifi, he encouraged people to ask the following questions:

- Am I actively seeking to connect?
- Are my settings open?
- What are my available connections?
- What do I need/want to discover?

Washington, DC's TV personality Ellen Bryan's oldest sister was struck by lightning when Ellen was 11. While this event took away her sister's ability to speak, it did not take away the spirit within her. Ellen closed out by saying that "lightning didn't take away the voice, it amplified it."

The following talk started out far differently than the previous three. Aarron Loggins took the stage and delivered his opening completely silently through sign language. Aarron is an advocate for and

member of the deaf and hard of hearing community.

An interpreter took the mic to translate for him, saying that the confusion we were feeling is how members of Aarron's community feel every single day. He advocates for closed captioning on video, which he says has the ultimate goal of bringing the deaf and hearing community together.

After a brief intermission, we were back underway.

While Aaron's talk began with the absence of sound, Yasmin Williams followed with a performance that was like none other than I've ever seen. She laid a guitar on her lap, strumming it, using percussive elements, tap shoes, and more to provide a one-of-a-kind experience.

After stagehands reset the stage, Rob Shepherd delivered a talk about robots. Going against what nearly every sci-fi movie would have us believe, he said humans are superior to robots for a number of reasons. He then said we can take lessons from our organic biology and "grow robots instead of building them." Regrettably, I didn't get a chance to ask if he could grow me a robotic testicle.

The final talk from the morning session was another sciency one from Elizabeth Whitlow. She said that in order for us to save ourselves, we need to start with saving the soil. Through organic regenerative farming practices, we can fix micro communities beneath our feet and within our bodies. In essence, soil equals life.

In the blink of an eye, it was now time for the second session of TEDxTysons.

While I spent the beginning backstage, I was still able to hear most of the talks. The session began with fourth grader, Matteo Lambert. He ran over 100 miles to raise over $50,000 for kids with cancer, so he could "help kids be kids."

Alan Fishel took the stage to share his theory of "fundamental gamification." Though he is a lawyer by trade, he developed an educational game called GeoPlunge that blended real learning with games. In his word, it has become "a great equalizer: turning something required into something desired."

Full disclosure, I was unable to hear Florence Breslin's and Charity Blackwell's talks, because I was getting mic'd up before and after my talk. However, I did get a chance to speak with Florence at the afterparty.

My TEDxTysons talk took place between Florence and Charity, and I humbly present it here.

I joined the audience just in time to hear Bob Dalton's story. His mother became homeless, which shifted his perspective on how he viewed homelessness. He decided to begin a company with the goal to donate blankets to homeless shelters with every purchase of a blanket. I rather enjoyed his company's name, Sackcloth and Ashes, although it didn't have to do with the type of sack I write

about. He had one of the most powerful quotes of the evening: “If we focus on issues, we end up creating more issues. If we focus on solutions, we end up creating more solutions.”

We wrapped up the event with Lauren Hough, author of the viral essay “I Was a Cable Guy.” She talked on code switching (essentially, changing your tone and mannerisms to meet the needs of a situation) and how the world would be a better place if everyone learned how to do it.

And seemingly as quickly as it began, TEDxTysons was over.

But the reactions were just beginning. Afterwards, we had a dinner reception and then an afterparty. Numerous attendees, male and female alike, came up to tell me that they found my talk to be both entertaining and educational.

Women said that they would make their husbands watch the talk when it went on YouTube. Others said that they planned to do testicular exams on their significant others. Perhaps more detail than I asked for, but whatever works!

But the reactions from men were what I was most interested in. Many of them said that they felt like I was directing the talk specifically at them and it made them think about their own health habits. They appreciated the blend of humor and factual information, and many said they would now take a more proactive approach to their health. Mission accomplished!

I would like to extend a big THANK YOU to the organizers, my speaker coach, sponsors, other speakers, volunteers, attendees, and more who made TEDxTysons possible. Without your help, support, and guidance, this would not have been possible.

It truly took all of us to give a talk that was… one of a kind.

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