

Acceptance Speech
PRSA Dayton Communicator of the Year—
The Smitty
April 10, 2008

Good evening. My name is Patty Sorrell. I'm honored to be with you as fellow communicators and friends.

Thank you, Natasha and Tony for your hard work on the awards ceremony, to the corporate sponsors and organizations who are here tonight to support us, and to everyone who submitted an award entry. What a pleasure to see the wonderful work that we are doing in public relations in Dayton. I'm proud.

I was surprised and delighted to learn about receiving this year's Communicator of the Year award. What an honor to be among other recent award winners, including Karen Baxter, Beth Mehlberth, and Shelley Bird. I'm humbled to be considered in their company, and the company of the late Rex Smith, who was a pillar in the Dayton public relations community and for whom this award is named. Thank you very much.

Last year, I was fortunate to serve the Dayton Area PRSA Chapter as our National Assembly delegate in Philadelphia. I love politics and governance and the PRSA Assembly is a fantastic way to see our professional organization in action. Passionate Assembly Delegates stand up and speak their minds. They debate, deliberate, and compromise. It makes me proud, and it's a lot of fun, to be part of a democratic process focused on Public Relations. If you have not had the pleasure of attending the International Conference or serve as an Assembly Delegate, I highly recommend it.

While I was there I was able to see the Keynote Speaker for last year's International Conference. Actress and advocate Mia Farrow spoke about the genocide currently happening in Africa's Darfur region. I like to think of myself as a good world citizen, but I was under-informed of the plight of refugees as their villages are burned, their men are blinded and killed and their women and children are tortured beyond belief.

But as important as learning about Darfur was the lesson that I learned about communication. That day, Mia Farrow used the stage to educate more than 1,000 communicators. She encouraged us to share the information about Darfur and speak out for change. Indeed, we all should learn more about the African crisis and take actions to pressure those who can, to put a stop to the genocide.

It was that speech that inspired me to write this one.

When I learned that I was to receive the Communicator of the Year award, I knew in a matter of minutes that I wanted to come to you tonight to ask you to consider how you may use your professional skills, talents, and passion to speak for someone or something who does not have their own voice.

In my life, communication has served as a cornerstone. In high school I fancied myself a creative writer, and wrote hundreds of poems, which are long gone now. I edited my high school's literary magazine, then went on to edit my university's literary magazine. I've worked in many dimensions of communications including employee communications, public and media relations, product packaging, websites, community relations, public speaking, and more.

Like most of you, I've had the pleasure to be one of the people in many of the organizations I've served who daily considers the value that the company brings to the community, employees, and customers they serve. And communicates that value. Throughout my career, I have been proud of that work.

But in the last year and a half, everything that I had learned about communication has been tested because of a small child with a big problem.

In October 2006, my husband and I learned that our son had regressed into autism.

Let me tell you a little bit about Woody. Woody was a bright, happy, vocal child for the first year and a half of life. He knew hundreds of words. He could point to objects in his favorite books. He understood and followed simple classroom routines and instructions. He could kick a ball at a target. He was, by all measures, a typical little boy.

But by age two, the lights were dimming for Woody. He stopped making eye contact. He engaged in repetitive and nonfunctional behavior. But most noticeably, he stopped talking.

In November 2006, Woody's vocabulary had shrunk from hundreds of words and three-word phrases to 40 single words. In a few months, his vocabulary had evaporated even more, down to 23 spoken, single words. And those words were mainly for the things he loved, like his Buzz Lightyear doll, juice, and ball.

Woody's lack of social skills was just as alarming. Before his regression Woody would tease his sister and poke her in the nose to show us where her nose was. Less than one year later, Woody not only could not show us where Marina's nose was, or anyone else's nose for that matter, but he actively avoided contact with other people. He preferred to be alone and to stand under the art easel at school. If he wasn't there, you'd find him repeatedly picking up berries and putting them in a bucket. He didn't recognize me as his mother when I entered or left the room. He was not babbling or laughing. It was heartbreaking.....and frustrating.

It was as if Woody was living in a soundproof room. He acted like he couldn't hear us. He couldn't talk to us. He was slipping away.

Immediately we sought help for how to reconnect our son to our world. And what we learned shocked us. Woody is part of a growing population of children who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

The ranks of individuals with autism are growing at a rate of 1 every 20 minutes. Just in the time we've been together here tonight, 5 new cases have been diagnosed. This is truly a crisis.

In our family, we were lucky to have good professionals quickly engage with Woody and we learned that to reach him we needed to change the way we tried to communicate with him.

Instead of trying to talk to Woody and reason with him, we had to focus on reaching him through play.

We put a lot of what we knew about parenting away (negotiating, reasoning, even bribing) and got down on the floor every day for tickling and tumbling. We started to hear Woody laugh again. He sometimes even looked at us. Over time we've heard a few more words.

Woody is far from recovered, but each day we are learning more about communicating with him and teaching him how to communicate with his world.

While I re-discovered how to communicate with my child, I found myself on another new communications path, too. That was communicating for my child.

As much as I love politics, I had never been inspired to call my State Speaker of the House. I had not written a letter in support of a cause. I had not taken time out of my busy schedule to advocate for laws to improve the lives of others. I'm pleased to say that I've embarked on a new part of communicating—that of communicating for someone who cannot speak for himself.

Woody can't stand up yet and have a voice on important issues like funding for mental health services. He can't thank his teachers for their tireless dedication to the population with special needs. He can't speak to parents about early warning signs for autism. He can't tell you his own story here tonight.

So, until he can, I will communicate for him.

I humbly ask each of you today to look into your own hearts and lives and find someone or something for which you can communicate. It may be an elderly relative afflicted by dementia. It may be an animal suffering abuse. It may be the environment or trying to save a species from extinction. Or increasing literacy. Or ending homelessness. Or helping the refugees in Darfur. Or connecting with persons with autism.

I'm struck by the thought that if Mia Farrow reached just 20 people in that large audience that day, and if even 10 of them acted to become more educated or advocate for change in Africa, by finding out what their corporation's position on the crisis is, or writing a fund-raising check, or mentioning Darfur in a speech, then we may be a small step closer to safety and peace for those fellow humans. And that is a step closer to the kind of world I'd like to live in.

And so it is for us today. Whatever inspires you, I ask you to use your talents to speak up, speak out, and speak for someone or something who needs your voice. I have learned that when communicators raise their voices, we are heard. We can speak for change in the world.

Thank you again for this prestigious award and for listening tonight.