

Speech: The Haymaker

***Winner, Semifinal Contest, World Championship of Public Speaking, 2018.
With less than a year in Toastmasters a young man rises to win the
semifinalist title which projected him onto the Big Stage (the Final 10.)
How did this happen? By retelling and reliving his story on the stage of a
scrawny kid in the ring and then hitting us with a haymaker.***

A speech by Kevin Johnson (August 23, 2018)

Have you ever heard the boxing term, "Haymaker?"

[Picks up a boxing glove]

It's this wild shot -

It's "Pow"-

It's risky-

It leaves the fighter vulnerable to devastating counters.

To the unlucky soul who receives this-

It can make a swift end to otherwise what would be a long bout.

Contest Chair, my fellow combatants,

Today I would like to invite you into the arena of what I call "my life."

As far back as I can remember

I was the butt of childhood jokes

The goofy, scrawny kid-

Who was aspiring to be one of those epic heroes

You would see in a movie-

Maybe even get the girl.

The first shot came to that dream

When I found out I had a learning disability - in reading.

That led to them pulling me out of the general population of school-
And placing me in special groups.
That made the jokes perfect.
And those jokes evolved into brutal bullying.
Ah, don't look so gloomy-
You knew the guy like me.
You remember the guy who was always sitting by himself-
Picked last for all the games-
The nerd-
He wouldn't even hang out with me.

By the time I got to high school-
I thought I would join physical fitness-
Buff up-
Shift the tide-
It only took 6 months for my lungs to collapse.

Let me ask you-
Where does a kid go who has no interpersonal skills-
No athletic ability-
Borderline illiterate-
And deflated lungs?
You can probably guess-
Drugs and alcohol.
By that point the dream was toast-
I had given up.
I staggered my way through the next few years-
Until finally an unlikely friend found me.
Picking me up and teaching me sobriety.

A glutton for punishment as I was-
I picked up the sport of boxing.
I wasn't very good-
But I stayed busy-
Until the day I stepped into the ring-
Against a four-time tournament champion.
That was not good.
But I started the fight like anybody would-
I came at him-

And hid behind my gloves-
He took those bricks he called fists-
And surgically cut his way-
Through my every defense.
I had nothing else left to do-
But get ready to lay on the mat and listen to everyone laugh.

But then came round 3.
Now I believe there are moments in life
That define us-
And change us forever.
And what I know now-
That I did not know then-
Was that my whole life had been like those first two rounds.
Hiding-Protected-Guarded-
Trapped in the stockade of fear-
A wall was in front of me-
But a wall that only let pain in-
And nothing out.
I knew that I needed to do something-
But how?
I was afraid-
And afraid of what?
Afraid of failure?-
I'm already a failure.
Afraid of getting hurt?-
It already hurts.
Afraid of them laughing at me?
They're already laughing.

But then I hit him-
Out of nowhere-
This haymaker soared-
Smashing into this guy's face-
Sending him back.
What happened next still blows my mind-
Well - he beat the heck out of me.
He came at me like I stole his lunch-

And pounded me into the canvas-
Saying-
Never do that again.
And it was over.

I tore my glove off- [Rips off his glove]
Stepped out of the ring.
Everyone is gone-
The corner man left me-
A loser-
Always. [Throws his glove on the floor]
Suddenly there was a figure standing beside me-
And it was old dream-crusher himself.
He put his hand on my shoulder,
And he said-
"You almost knocked me out with that punch-
And you've got power-
You need to learn to use it."

And he began to train me.
And from there I progressed in ways-
That I never thought I could.
Not just in the ring-
But in all aspects of life.
A whole world of confidence was opening in front of me.
All my dreams were coming true-
I even got the girl. [Points at his ring finger]

Up until that point
I had not so much as read a children's book-
But I finished a Master's Degree in Counseling-
With a 4.0.
And I used that to help people like myself-
Who need to see that they have potential-
Beyond what they know.

But, why did I pick this story to share with all of you? -
It's because in each one of us
There's a hidden ability- [Picks up the glove]

A haymaker.
But we are afraid to drop our guard-
And throw it.
And in doing so we make ourselves thieves-
Robbing the world of the best gifts we have to offer.
You're Toastmasters-
You're standing in front of audiences-
Submitting your life-
Your words-
And your story to the world-
And await their criticism.
As you do that-
I want you to take this with you-
If you're going to take a shot-
You have to be vulnerable.
And if you're ever going to live the life you truly want-
You can't be afraid to lose the one you have.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
I'm Kevin Johnson-
And I went from a broken dreamer-
To a confident believer-
All because I took one shot.
Now I've shown you my haymaker-
Now show me yours.

(C) 2021 Kevin Johnson. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

Brian Woolf's comments: This a "full kimono" speech. The speaker opens it up fully and we see all of his failings and limitations-and we feel for him. So that when he steps into the ring, we hope this scrawny kid floors the four-time champion. But he doesn't which adds to the speaker's authenticity. But he learns something bigger and better. That haymaker didn't win the fight. But its impact changed him-and inspired us. [Footnote: When Kevin delivered this speech in his NC District 37 contest he received a standing ovation. A rarity in contests.]

Copyright © 2018-2021 Kevin Johnson

And there's more where this came from...

Visit Brian Woolf on the web for his complete collection of
articles, speeches, insights and practical advice, at

www.brianwoolf.com

Email: brian@brianwoolf.com

Tel: +1 864 458-8277

BRIANWOOLF.COM