

Reflections on the 2004 TOSTI Awards

By Keith Lee

“She wasn’t much of a looker, but I liked the way she was dressed.” For his ribald account of the first days of humanity, Palmo Carpino (a.k.a Adamo, of Adamo and Eve fame) walked away with first prize at the first-ever TOSTI Awards, an event organized on behalf of Voiceprint, a national media service that has been providing news and information services for blind and visually-impaired Canadians since 1990.

The Omnipotent Story-Telling Idol competition (or TOSTIs for short) was an initiative masterminded by the Calgary bureau of Voiceprint with co-operation from several Toastmasters as well as representatives from Dale Carnegie, the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, and other organizations with an interest in storytelling, broadcasting and public speaking. The event was held on the evening of February 7, 2004, at the Glenmore Inn. Over ninety people attended the event, which featured several fabulous storytellers, a great dinner and many hours of tremendous entertainment.

The MCs for the evening were Sue Deyell and Stacey Litke from the Breeze 103.1. Both of these talented ladies kept the show flowing well and shared many amusing stories and jokes throughout the night. My favorite joke of theirs was the one about Aunt Karen and her drinking; I hope to spring it on my club sometime soon.

The show began with some African drumming and dance from Afodon, a group of performers who energized the audience with their dynamic music and rhythms. After the opening ceremonies, the stage was set for the ten storytellers to share their tales about the contest theme: “The History Books were wrong because...”

Each storyteller took a vastly different approach to the theme. What follows are my impressions of the ten speakers, who each succeeded in remarkably different ways.

- ❖ The opening speech entranced the audience with a tale of conspiracy and mystery; the cult of the Magi needed to protect their secrets, and recruited Mark Bernard to help! Mark hinted at their dark powers and technologies and cast light on some of the undercurrents seething beneath the visible world.
- ❖ Angeline Kendall delivered an astonishing poem about the struggle between two powerful forces: the Eagle of the sky (representing optimism) and the Dragon of the sea (champion of mediocrity). Her use of language was very dramatic and conveyed the epic scope of her story of "the last of the great optimists" well.
- ❖ The next speaker was the first of several to use humor very effectively. Kathy Shworak related how it took a woman's wisdom to see the potential benefits of fire. "When a problem had to be solved, it wasn't a man who did it; it was a woman!" The audience responded very well.

- ❖ Tanya Currie-Pye presented a well-researched talk about the differences observed in decision-making patterns of monkeys and men, focusing on how the capogen monkey chooses his friends over a hoard of food. Would humans do the same, offered such riches? Her thought-provoking speech offered the audience a lot to consider.
- ❖ Wearing little more than a fig leaf, veteran Toastmaster Palmo Carpino entertained the audience with his version of the story of Adam and Eve and their time in the Garden. Utilizing several props, one-liners and cute asides, Palmo (in the character of Adamo, the original Italian renaissance man) offered many insights into the travails of life in Paradise. After many good works, Adamo is made an offer by his creator: "He said that He would make a mate for me who would provide home cooked meals, clean up the leaves around the place and make the evenings a little less lonely. 'It'll only cost you an arm and a leg', He said. I considered this proposal thoughtfully. 'That sounds a little expensive', I said. 'How much can I get for a rib?'"
- ❖ Peter von Sass shared an intense and deeply personal family history, a reflection on how people can become deluded by history, in particular their own history. His account of the character and background of his family was very dense and imbued with much emotion and incredible imagery; pathos was tempered by hope.
- ❖ One of the audience favorites was eleven-year-old Tiana Knight, who shared her recollection of the night when her sleep was disturbed by many creatures of suspicious origin and appearance. Her vivid wordplay and strong powers of description were complemented by an extremely confident delivery.
- ❖ The next speaker, Carey Rutherford, offered a reflection upon the experience of witnessing the birth of his first child, and the significance of that event to him. He connected well with the audience and conveyed his message with memorable language and considerable insight.
- ❖ "Our nakedness was greatly exaggerated!" Ralph Miller explained in his speech about a hike to Twin Falls that became a miserable slog but ended under auspicious circumstances. A master storyteller, Mr. Miller was very comfortable in front of the audience and told his story with sublime grace at an unhurried pace.
- ❖ The tenth finalist in the competition was Robyn Hay, who told of how she earned the right to relax after a harrowing day trying to get out of an Asian country in the midst of a general strike. This particular adventure included

rickshaws, marching bands, and angry mobs; every moment of her presentation was infected with her zest for life and travel.

Those of you familiar with Toastmasters contests know that usually a group of four or five judges will decide who comes out on top, but this was not a Toastmasters contest -- we had over ninety judges casting votes! Every member of the audience got to pick their favorites.

While the organizing committee counted the ballots, local broadcaster and guest storyteller Darrel Janz offered his own impressions of how "the history books were wrong", covering such topics as the life of the creator of the Simpsons (Matt Groening), the origins of radio broadcasting, misconceptions about Thanksgiving (On the significance of 1492: "And that's another lie! It just rhymes with 'Columbus sailed the ocean blue...") and concluding with a shocking expose on the true origins of the world: "... and so the committee commended God on His implementation, but recommended that man should have been fashioned in the image of the committee..."

The evening concluded with the announcement of the top three winners as decided by the audience votes. Tiana Knight won third place; Kathy Shworak took second; and Palmo 'Adamo the First Man' Carpino came first (how ironic!). The prize for each of the top three finishers was pretty cool: each storyteller would be professionally recorded and have their story broadcast through Voiceprint!

Those in attendance at the first annual TOSTI Awards were treated to a wonderful evening of entertainment. Besides getting the opportunity to hear many interesting stories, anecdotes and jokes, the audience got to listen to and learn about many different perspectives and approaches to storytelling, and life. "History depends on those who wrote it", one of the speakers said near the close of the evening. I think that the first annual TOSTI Awards went pretty well.

If you would like to learn more about Voiceprint, you can visit the national website at www.voiceprint.ca or contact Danielle Oberle at the Calgary bureau at vpchief@shaw.ca.

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