

A Fire in Upstate New York

By Jack Doxey

A large electronics firm was holding a convention in the Adirondack Mountains just outside of New York City. The last evening of the conference the President of the company was giving his keynote speech before approximately 800 participants. At the same time, in the room immediately behind the stage, a fire had broken out. The custodian on duty, Jim Wright, witnessed the fire and attempted to bring it under control. His effort went for naught and the fire spread quickly.

He realized that he had to get the people out of the auditorium as quickly as possible. He entered the auditorium and went immediately to the podium and stopped the key note speaker in the middle of his presentation. He took over the microphone and in the calmest voice that he could muster he addressed the audience in the following manner:

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a fire in the back of the stage. Please don’t become alarmed but to ensure the safety of all I am asking everyone to follow my instructions. The people on the left side of the auditorium please proceed in an orderly fashion to the back of the room and go out of the building and stay out of the building until we give you the all clear signal”. He then proceeded to give similar instructions to the balance of people in the auditorium. The conference center burned down to the ground.

The custodian was singled out as the person who saved the day for all the people in the center. It was reported that his

calm demeanor, under an extremely stressful situation, was instrumental in getting the people out of the building and to safety. He became, without a doubt, the hero of the town.

The story got widespread attention and reporters came from the surrounding areas to interview the new town hero. They asked how he remained so calm under such a stressful situation. Jim replied:

“I was so preoccupied with helping the people and getting the message across that I had no time to think about myself or being scared. My primary goal was the people and their safety”.

“However, now that I have time to think about the whole situation I have become very nervous, not about the fire, but that I took over the microphone and delivered a mini speech to almost a thousand people. I have never given a speech before and as a matter of fact I am terrified of giving speeches in front of even a few people not to mention 800. I just can’t believe that I did it. It makes me nervous just thinking about it.” Jim Wright completely lost any self consciousness because he was totally engaged in thinking about the 800 people in the audience and getting his message across. The audience and the message became the dominant thought.

Jim unwittingly provided excellent advice to all of us who strive to become better speakers. Jim Wright’s advice is simple and straight forward but at the same time profound:

From time to time in your professional career, you will be called upon to present your ideas to an audience. The next time you give a speech think about Jim Wright and select a subject that you can get passionate about and truly believe in. Your self consciousness and ego will fade to the background when you take the high road of concentrating on your audience and their needs and expectation and not your own.

