

Spoken like a champion

Toastmasters winner overcomes adversity

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For the first time since 1965, a Spokane resident will be among 10 public speakers vying for the highest award bestowed by Toastmasters International, a nonprofit training organization devoted to public speaking.

Rich Hopkins, 38, prevailed over 3,000 contestants in seven states and British Columbia for the right to advance to the organization's international speech competition Aug. 26 in Washington, D.C. The contest will be the culminating event of 200,000-member Toastmaster International's annual convention.

But perhaps even more inspiring than Hopkins' first-place regional finish earlier this month is the fact that the father of six delivered his winning speech just weeks after having his left leg amputated below the knee.

"I actually scheduled the amputation around the contest," the recuperating Hopkins said matter-of-factly in a recent interview.

Hopkins has suffered since birth with a congenital bone and tissue disorder that affected his left leg. By the time he turned 10, he'd undergone eight surgeries to help him walk. Doctors told him he'd be permanently disabled and would need to use a wheelchair by the time he was 30.

In January, his condition reached its end stage and he had to decide quickly which medical intervention he wanted to pursue.

"Of the options, amputation was going to provide me with the most regular life," he said. "Over the past few years I've been able to walk less and less. I should be able to do more now, once I'm fully recovered, than I've been able to do for the last 10 years."

His determination to make it to the upcoming international speech contest also helped take his mind off of losing his lower leg, he said.

But he admitted that his confidence was shaken after finishing second at the pre-qualifying division level. Luckily, first and second-place winners there both advance to the next contest.



Rich Hopkins recently won the regional Toastmasters International speaking contest and is headed to the world championships in August. He is shown with his family outside their Spokane home. (Christopher Anderson The Spokesman-Review)

Public-speaking tips

1. Use stories about yourself. They are easily remembered and rarely questioned.
2. Practice everywhere. Talk to your mirror, your pets, your plants.
3. Know your audience. Use Internet research, newspaper clippings and personal interviews to discover their culture, quirks, and humor.
4. Take control of the environment. Show up early, or do a walk-through the day before. Don't let the setup detract from your

"I spent the next four and a half weeks writing a brand new speech so I would do better" at the regional contest, Hopkins said. He spoke from a wheelchair that day in Vancouver, B.C.

"The last thing I wanted to do was to do a speech where I couldn't move my arms and be involved with the audience because I was hanging on crutches," he said.

His topic: "We are all successes."

Now he's writing the speech he'll use at his August appearance before an estimated 2,000 convention-goers. To prepare for the event, he's speaking to as many different Toastmaster clubs as he can.

"It's about living your life with passion, persistence and the perspective of a child," he said of his new talk.

Speakers have 4.5 minutes to 7.5 minutes — not a split second longer — to give their addresses.

"The biggest challenge is the laughter you get can lasts longer (before a big audience), and occasionally you get laughter when you don't expect it. That can throw off your timing and you have to be ready to have an emergency close to shut down, to bail out."

In upcoming weeks, Hopkins is scheduled to be fitted with a prosthetic leg and to spend a considerable amount of time in what can be grueling physical therapy and rehabilitation.

His wife, his church and his fellow area Toastmasters have sustained him, both emotionally and financially. He also works part-time selling advertising for Spokane-Coeur d'Alene Living magazine.

"My dream is to be a public speaker and to do it full-time, professionally. My wife has always been supportive of this and has this dream with me," he said.

Hopkins said he already feels like a winner having made it this far.

"I expect to walk on stage at the international convention. And ironically, I hope I'm the last man standing," he said.

message.

5. Funnel your fear into enthusiasm. There's nothing wrong with being nervous – if you're not, you might not care enough about what you're about to do.

6. Give yourself permission to speak. Your audience is there to hear you, and they are rooting for you to give them information and inspiration to change their minds.

7. Ignorance is bliss. If you don't give the "perfect" presentation, your audience often won't know – unless you point it out to them.

8. Throw out your notes. Know your topic and follow an outline printed in large type place where you can easily see it. Use specific notes only for quotes, regulations, and technically specific information.

9. Smile and have fun. The best eulogies often evoke uproarious laughter, so why should your audiences die of boredom?

Source: Rich Hopkins, RichSpeaks