

# “Well With My Soul”

by Leah and Sarah Busler

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## A Duo Interpretation

- ❖ Ranked 1<sup>st</sup> Place in Arizona and 1<sup>st</sup> Place in the Nation.<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ Tournaments: Christmas Colloquium (1<sup>st</sup>), Point Loma Classic (1<sup>st</sup>), Desert Gem (3<sup>rd</sup>), Concordia Challenge (2<sup>nd</sup>), Camelback Classic (1<sup>st</sup>), Rocky Mountain Classic (5<sup>th</sup>), Veni Vidi Vici (3<sup>rd</sup>), National Invitational Tournament of Champions (1<sup>st</sup>).

*“I will never sing that hymn the same way again.”*  
*“It was like I was there, experiencing it with the characters.”*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.speechranks.com/profile/entry/30970>

*“You guys really impacted me.”*  
*“That was the most artistic duo I have ever seen.”*

When we started to work on our duo interpretation at the start of the school year, we did not expect that throughout the season we would receive comments from our judges and audience members on how strongly the piece impacted them. It was an amazing experience.

At the beginning of the school year, we had a vision for what we wanted the audience to see; the question was how to get there. We made frequent changes to the blocking and dialogue of our duo interpretation. By the time tournaments rolled around, our piece had dramatically changed from the mangled blocking and confusing lines we started out with. At the end of the year, we were both blessed and surprised to receive the first place award at the National Invitational Tournament of Champions.

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**We want to share with you how you can raise your competitive performance with hard work and creativity. We are going to walk you through how we worked out our interping muscles, so we could run the marathon successfully all the way through nationals.**

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Months before the season even started, we decided on a story to portray. The piece we chose was titled “Well With My Soul,” authored by Rachael Phillips, based on the story behind the hymn, “It Is Well With My Soul” by Horatio Spafford.

## **The Story**

In this true story, Horatio Spafford and his family are about to embark on their family vacation to Europe. Unfortunately, Horatio had to stay behind to tie up loose ends in his business while his family continued to travel. During the family’s journey across the Atlantic, they collided with another ship, and Horatio’s four daughters, ages two to twelve, drowned in the ocean while his wife was rescued and taken to Wales. After receiving a telegram from his wife, Horatio boarded another ship to meet her. During his journey, the captain informed him that their ship was directly over the spot where his children had passed away. While wrestling with his grief, Horatio wrote the famous hymn, “It Is Well With My Soul.”

As you probably have figured out by now, our piece was dramatic. Because the lead role was a male, a unique challenge was posed: the both of us are females. At the beginning of the year, we were advised *not* to perform this piece because of this difficult challenge. However, knowing our chemistry would lead to a great partnership, we choose to move forward.

## The Partnership

I'd like to focus on that first: *choosing a partner*. Every aspiring duo competitor must ask this. Through our duo experiences, we have learned quite a bit about partners. Here are some tips to keep in mind when searching for that special person.

**Commitment.** How much time do you think a duo takes? Well, we know from experience that it takes a decent amount of time to prepare a good duo, not to mention the time spent on tournaments. One of the first things to examine when considering a potential partner is time. Both of you should be on the same page when it comes to practice times and tournament commitment. If you are not, it will cause unnecessary tension. We lucked out: we're sisters with similar schedules and the same tournament commitment.

**Someone You Are Comfortable With.** Let's get goofy. You are going to be brainstorming and trying out all of your wacky, silly, and creative ideas with this person. If you are not comfortable, it will harm your overall potential. Now, this does not mean you *have* to choose your little brother, but make sure you will be comfortable enough to express your ideas and get things done. Besides, if you are uncomfortable, how will you ever show your partner your insane Chewbacca impression or that hyena cackle you have been working on since you were three?

**Chemistry.** Not the science course you take in high school, but how well you interact with each other, playing off of each other's strengths. There are several ways this impacts your duo experience. For a competitive duo, both partners should have the same acting ability. This will lead to an overall balanced presentation. Also, your personalities should be compatible during practice. For example, Suzie is Sally's best friend, but both of them are overbearing and can never come to any conclusions. Even though they are comfortable with each other, Suzie and Sally would have more difficulty with their duo because of their personalities. You may be comfortable with someone, but you may not have great chemistry. And here we have an example of the perfect duo partners: Sarah and Leah. Ha-ha, just kidding! We definitely were not perfect, but we did get some things right when it came to chemistry. Our personalities allowed us to work together comfortably, and both of us had a different set of strengths. Leah made sure that we hounded in the basics for a strong foundation while Sarah easily designed artistic blocking. This led to an overall well-rounded performance.

## The Piece

Because our piece was dramatic, we will predominantly be giving tips on how to successfully choose a dramatic story. But some of our advice will apply to those of you who would like to perform a humorous duo.

**Think of Your Audience.** When picking your piece you must remember who your audience is. Something your peers think is fabulous may not hit a home run with the judges. This applies to both dramatic and humorous. Just as it is in NCFCA, Stoa judges are predominantly parents. For our duo, we knew that our piece would connect and be impactful because we knew who our audience was, giving us a higher chance of success. Another thing to keep in mind when thinking of your audience is how it will impact them. Every interpretation, whether humorous or dramatic, is telling a story and making a point. Think about what you want your audience to walk away with.

**Make Sure It Is Manageable.** Usually, a shorter piece or a more direct plot line works best for a duo. A longer book that is intense and complicated would be more difficult to capture in ten minutes. Find something short and simple. Trust us, it will make your life a whole lot easier! If you do decide to take that longer book, do not try and put the whole thing into your script! Just choose a small section of it and go from there. Take our duo for instance. This may sound surprising, but in actuality, we only used lines and scenes from a single chapter in our book. There was so much more we could have pulled from, but we decided to keep our plot line as clean, straightforward, and concise as possible. Our overall word count ended up at 919 words, approximately six minutes reading aloud. This provided us four minutes of margin to be creative with blocking and affective with pauses.

**Keep Blocking in Mind.** The story you choose may be fun to read, but is it fun to watch? Remember, your audience is watching as well as listening, so make sure your piece *lends* itself to blocking. Choose a piece that has movement built into the literature—meaning, you can visualize it when you read it—so you do not have to wrack your brain later on.

**Go Intense.** This tip is for all of you dramatic people out there. When compared to others, a piece that is not extreme will not be ranked as high; in fact, it will be easily surpassed. We are not saying do something bloody and gory. Like we said, remember who your audience is. When picking a dramatic piece, select something tasteful and strong but emotional and heart wrenching.

## Blocking

Blocking should not *block* you from success. Successful blocking is artistic and clear. If your blocking is sloppy or mottled, your audience will not understand what is going on. Because humorous and dramatic are two different sides of the spectrum, it makes sense that the way you would block each type of duo is different. For a humorous duo, it is okay to be out of the box with crazy, fun characters and blocking. On the other hand, crazy, fun blocking would take away from a dramatic piece. Here are some things to pay attention to when blocking a dramatic piece.

**The Fourth Wall and Details.** The fourth wall is the imaginary world in place of your audience—i.e. your character's surroundings. For any piece, it is important that you incorporate and clearly use the fourth wall. Bringing depth and blocking ideas, the fourth wall most effectively involves the audience's mind. Because we incorporated this vital tool into every possible area of our duo, our audience was sucked into our story and experienced what was happening with the characters. For example, during the very last scene of our duo when Horatio Spafford is on a ship looking out over the Atlantic, we effectively used the fourth wall by placing Horatio's hands on the railing while looking over the ocean. This little detail clarified what was happening in the scene, but also made it appear more realistic. For a dramatic piece, it is vital that you understand what is happening to your characters in every scene, both emotionally and physically.

**Use Your Characters.** Not only can you use the fourth wall for blocking inspiration, but using your characters' interactions and reactions can provide effective blocking as well. The way that your characters interact with each other can aid your audience's understanding of each character and advance the authenticity of your overall presentation – such as Horatio and his wife's interaction in the opening scene of our duo. Before parting, Mr. and Mrs. Spafford are saying their farewells while grasping each other's hands. This seems like a small gesture, but it influenced our audience's perception of these characters. How your characters react to the world around them also aids in blocking. Another example from our piece that explains this concept was Horatio's wife and children's reactions to the sinking ship. During this scene, we had our characters rocking and swaying with the ship. We also had the characters jerk downward to show the ship cracking. These two instances showed the audience what was happening while also allowing them to become involved in the story. The roles of the characters in your story can play a huge part in the way you decide to block.

Creative and artistic blocking is what sets duo teams apart. If you effectively use the fourth wall and your characters, your blocking will be seamless and natural.

## **Practice Like You Never Have Before!**

**Do It Again!** You can never practice too much. When we were in the throes of tournament season, we were tempted to slack off of practicing since we had practiced earlier in the year. But, our mother encouraged us to do it again. She asked us how often we thought people in other competitive sports practiced and reminded us that if their coach said to do it again, they did—no matter how many times they had done that routine before. Now, we are not saying to practice at every waking moment, but we want you to understand that you cannot expect to do well at tournaments without practicing and drilling beforehand in order to keep your performance

polished. We practiced a great deal and by the end of the season we were able to perform our duo without thinking about it.

**Watch and Listen.** During practice, we filmed ourselves performing sections of our piece so we could understand what the audience was seeing. We knew what we wanted to portray, but often we performed it differently than we intended. By filming, we could identify which areas needed modifications. Another technique we used was simply listening to the recording; taking away the visuals allowed us to concentrate on how clearly we spoke and delivered vocal characterization. These two simple methods can make your practice time much more efficient.

**Be Open to Feedback.** By being humble and actually applying feedback from parents, siblings, coaches, and peers, you can greatly improve your duo. This may seem like a no-brainer, but for some people, it is actually quite difficult. Remember that you are not better than that coach or friend that is giving you critiques. These people represent who will actually be judging and ranking you, so pay attention! As you can imagine, during the tournament season we received feedback from several different viewpoints and critiques. We did not apply every single piece of feedback, but we did pay attention to those that were recurring. Your judges and coaches have a different perception of your performance than you do. After all, you understand your piece perfectly because you created it, but your audience does not know its ins and outs. By implementing critiques and suggestions, you can make your performance understandable and enjoyable to different types of audiences.

## **Tournament Time!**

**Do Not Care What Others Think About You.** In front of an audience, it can be difficult to let go of the idea of what others may think you look like. There is the temptation to hold back for fear of looking dumb or stupid. But to be honest, you will feel ten times better and your performance will look ten times better if you forget about yourself and just *go for it*. Do not care what others think about you. This is true for every presentation. Believe us, we have been there! The best performers are not afraid to put themselves out there.

**Before the Round.** Before walking into each round, we ensured that our mindset was about the audience, not about us. Taking time to prepare yourself mentally before each round will allow you to make every performance your absolute best. This was especially true for us since we were performing such an impactful story. Before each round, we did two things to prepare our minds and hearts: (1) listen to music to help us block out the world around us and (2) pray. For this particular piece we also altered Sarah's appearance slightly. Since she was playing the role of Horatio, we needed her to appear in the audience's mind more like a father figure. We tried to remove anything that would be distracting or make her look feminine. We removed her jewelry

and pinned back her hair. In addition, Sarah always wore black and had a more masculine blazer at times. Overall, taking time to prepare yourself before the round will enhance each performance.

## **Final Thoughts**

Even though our piece was dramatic and the tips we have shared are rather intense, we did have a ton of fun competing with this duo. We have grown closer together and now have many fond memories of the 2014-2015 season. Remember, you can have a blast whether your piece is funny or dramatic! By taking the steps we have given you, through laughter or tears, you can impact any audience.

**WATCH IT on Youtube!**

**[www.trainingminds.org/bronze15/busler-duo](http://www.trainingminds.org/bronze15/busler-duo)**





# “Regina Flector Wins the Science Fair”

—  
by Faith Froemming

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## A Humorous Interp

- ❖ Ranked 1<sup>st</sup> Place Humorous Interpretation in NCFCA for 2015
- ❖ Tournaments: NCFCA Nebraska Qualifier (semifinalist) NCFCA Regional Qualifier (3rd) NCFCA National Championship (1st)

I deserved to be in the predicament I found myself in, and that’s the plain, hard truth. I was sitting crosslegged, somewhat dejectedly, outside my first round of Humorous with a speech I

simply hadn't finished memorizing! My turn came and the only choice I had was to take a deep breath, paint on a smile for the judges, and give it my very best shot. And so it began...

## **The Whim, The Work, and the Winner Circle**

My Story: Yes it's true. My first humorous round this season was pretty much a disaster. I have competed in NCFCA for many years and have always been excited for the tournament season. However, this year I hadn't had time to cut and sift through all my interp ideas. I tend to be a horrible procrastinator, so my Humorous wasn't added to my event list till the very last qualifier. The piece I chose was '*Regina Flector Wins the Science Fair*' by Marco Ramirez. It involved really fast character changes, which can be a nightmare for memorization. And trust me, I had nightmares about standing in front of judges, blinking stupidly because I couldn't remember a bit of it! Thankfully I was able to get through it and actually discovered that I absolutely loved giving this speech.

By the time Regionals rolled around I had actually started getting a grip on the piece as well as developing characters that were getting lots of laughs. I finished third at this tournament and started feeling a little more confident in my ability and my speech. Then came Nationals. "*Nationals*" has always been this scary word that means friends, incredible speakers, and not breaking. I adore Nationals, but had never excelled there, so to place first in the nation this season has been a highlight I will never ever forget!

Now I realize that my tournament record was an incredibly short list, as well as rather unimpressive until Nationals. But really, that's my point. Not everyone can or will win all season generally. And just because you haven't, does not mean you will not excel in the future! So here are some tips and ideas that I have found useful with my Humorous piece and speech in general. But first let me give a quick synopsis of my speech.

Regina is an awkward young girl giving her presentation at the science fair. The other children make fun of her, even though their projects are all pretty weird and badly done. For example, Sam Lerman's project is his 'Mom's Facelift.' After each child presents, Regina concludes with a speech about her struggles and hard work and ends up winning. It is a fast-paced speech with crazy characters and a feel-good ending.

## **Piece Selection**

My speech choice is extremely important to me, and I try to hold it up to a general criteria. The following are some questions that will help you pick a good competition piece.

1. **Is it personal?** Yes! This was one of my favorite things about my speech this year. I could relate with the slightly awkward and geeky Regina. I also could see different aspects of people I knew or cared about in the other characters. And the characters aren't the only thing you have to relate to. The story itself can be something that you love, or just think is side splittingly funny!
2. **Do you love it?** You must! If you are just looking for that marathoner award and throw in a humorous to get it, chances are your piece will not go far in competition. You have to care.
3. **Will you get bored of it?** Nope. I know speeches can get a little old after a whole season, and that's expected, but the judges can tell if you're simply reciting and not connecting.

## Characterization

In my opinion, characterization will make or break a speech. Good acting is something that's hard to find today, so developing believability in a speech will go a long way. Creating believability is hard in a humorous: every character is supposed to be goofy and over the top, right? Well, this is where many HIs go wrong. Funny doesn't mean 'in your face' all the time. Developing characters to be quirky, have strange posture, funky mannerisms, or funny voices can go much further.

1. **Development is a must.** Take your characters to the next level. For example, in my piece there is a little girl named Tiffany who's devoted her science fair project to glitter, and studying if it's edible. I decided to have her act like she had just drank ninety red bulls. So she was constantly scurrying hither and thither, talking fast, and acting like a nut case overdosed on sugar. Fun Fact: she was insanely fun to play, and I was told by a friend that she reminded him of me. So much for me relating with the awkward girl! The bottom line is, form an idea, and then start coloring it in with quirky, fun, and of course humorous actions and personality.
2. **Timing.** I learned so much about comedic timing this year. Taking a pause here or a peripheral there can add so much. Being able to hold your character for a few seconds while the crowd is laughing is also important. I learned this the hard way this year. In a prelim round at a tournament, I delivered a semi funny line in my piece and the audience naturally responded with a laugh. Well, much to my dismay, the audience's laugh lasted longer than I had planned on. I had already moved on to my next character and line. This caused the

audience to stifle their laugh, as well as miss some of the much funnier line that came after. I shot myself in the foot there, but learned a valuable lesson. Don't be in a rush—let the audience laugh for as long as they will.

3. **Watch others.** Now there is some controversy over whether or not it's good advice to tell speakers to watch videos or other speeches to get ideas. Personally, I have learned so much from YouTube, my friends' speeches, comedians, movie characters, even random strangers that make me laugh! I don't feel that it's copying to gather ideas from these sources. The truth is, you could never be those people or act exactly like them no matter how hard you try. I'm not encouraging trying to copy someone exactly, but take the idea, and put your spin on it. You can make some magical characters, and have a blast in so doing!

## My Strategy

After I qualified for NCFCA Nationals and decided that I really enjoyed giving my speech, I made a few plans for the upcoming tournament. These are some of my competitive strategy tips. Here are a few that worked for me.

1. **A Moral in Humorous.** This was my biggest risk this year, and it totally paid off! Now, using a moral as the last minute of my speech was risky because of the obvious. Humorous means funny. Well, as I said above, Humorous does not just mean jumping around acting crazy. You have to develop a character. And in this case, Regina had her moment and stood up to the bullies. Some judges didn't love this aspect and ranked me down. But the majority loved that it was something different than all the rest and appreciated the thought-provoking end. So I chose to hammer the moral, and I believe the moral played a major part in bringing home the win.
2. **Practice.** Practice, but don't practice too much. I can hear all the gasps from all over the country, but I wholeheartedly believe that it's better to love your speech and not be bored of it, than to have it practiced to a point where you could recite it in your sleep. But memorization is important, so don't put it off.
3. **Confidence and Connection.** Look your judges in the eye as much as humanly possible. Don't step out of character, but it's really important to snap the attention of your judges up, and fight for it with your life. This is where confidence comes into play. Once your judges are staring you in the eye, you need to show them what you're made of: even if you don't

feel it, always show confidence. As a last note on this, please don't be prideful. The judges are offering their precious time and energy to you, so treat it as the gift that it is, and be gracious. Whether you are or aren't, if a judge deems you haughty, it is generally detrimental to your ballot. So err on the side of caution.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Like I said before, I have learned so much this year. I've learned so many things about Humorous. I've learned so much about competition in general, and surprisingly learned new things about myself. Don't be discouraged if you're not placing high at tournaments—it really means nothing towards the upcoming ones. Never stop working on your speech, and always be willing to learn and take criticism. My journey has been crazy beyond all my wildest dreams!

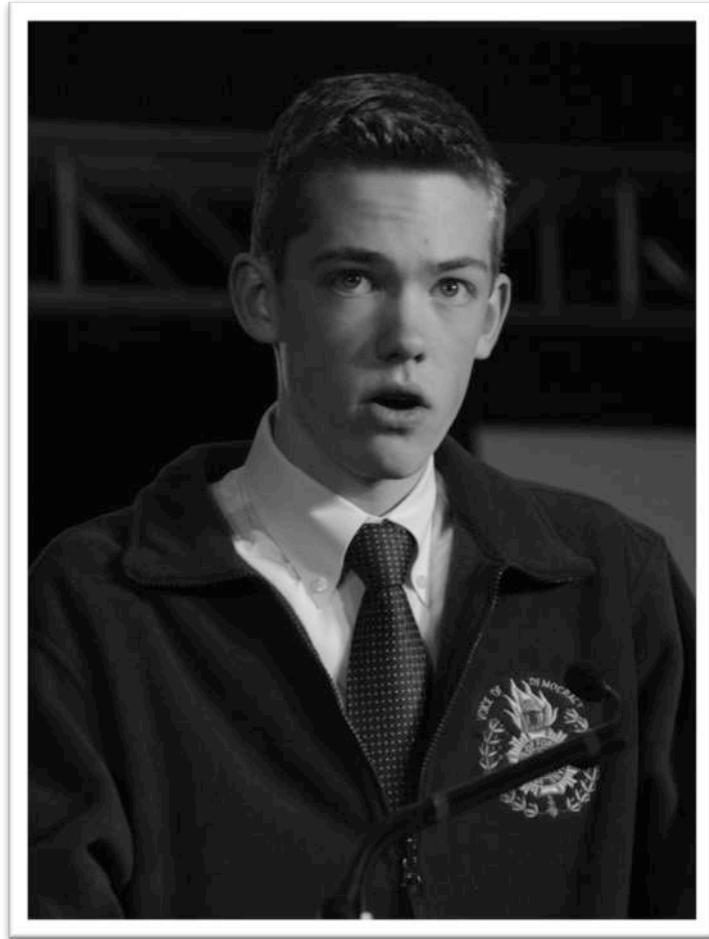
Winning feels amazing, but please remember the goal: to bring Honor and glory to our Savior Jesus Christ. Now, this is humorous, and this category generally does not have much to offer in the moral department; that's okay. Jesus says laughter is like medicine, so use the talents He's given you to make people happy. Use the platform to hone your skills as a speaker. Encourage your fellow competitors, don't make it all about the competition. Enjoy the adrenaline rush and just have fun!



# “Freedom Because of Bravery”

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by Adam Densmore

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## *A Voice of Democracy Speech by Adam Densmore*

❖ Ranked 1<sup>st</sup> Place in Colorado, 1<sup>st</sup> Place in the Nation

Levels of Competition: Post (1<sup>st</sup>), District (1<sup>st</sup>), State (1<sup>st</sup>), National (1<sup>st</sup>)

### **The Orders**

Once upon a time there were teenagers who didn't want to do extra work when they couldn't imagine that they would possibly reap any benefit from their time and effort. Especially myself—I was a busy kid, I won't lie, and thought of myself as someone who didn't exactly have the time to enter a contest I couldn't ever see myself winning. I had friends who had

competed—in fact, my sister competed and didn’t even win at the district level—if they can’t do it, wouldn’t it be arrogant for me to try? To put myself on the same playing field as them and expect a different, better outcome?

Well, yes it would if we were all here by chance and there was no “big man upstairs.” But I strongly believe that is not at all the case. When I didn’t want to enter, I not only wasn’t giving myself a chance to express my heartfelt beliefs about an important issue and possibly (or impossibly as I saw it at the time) reap a monetary reward from doing so, but I wasn’t giving God a chance to work through me and be glorified. Don’t ever catch yourself doing that.

Obviously I did enter, though, or I wouldn’t be writing this article. Deciding to enter was unequivocally the most difficult part of the whole competition. Shockingly, it was the part I very nearly failed at. In fact, I did fail.

My parents, however (thank God for the structure of a family—two people with authority and insight paired to their children), did not fail. I thought they had wasted hours of my time, but they hadn’t. They had all but forced me into what turned out to be one of the best things I have ever done with my life. They pointed out that if I have time to text or email friends, or spend so much time on Stoa speech and debate, I would have time to write and record a 5 minute speech. They were right.

So I finally pulled the trigger and said, “Alright fine, I’ll do it.” But it was very late. The deadline was just days away, and I hadn’t even started thinking about the topic. But I was now determined that I would do this, and since I’m doing it, I figured, I might as well give it all I had.

## **The Contest**

The Voice of Democracy “audio essay” competition, hosted and funded by the Veterans of Foreign Wars Association, or VOD from the VFW, is rather simple. Write an essay, record it, burn it to a CD, fill out a short form with your name and number, deliver or mail it to a VFW post, and cross your fingers. Much more, for me, went in to it, but that’s the essence. 1 out of 15 speeches at a VFW post is selected to move on to district (there are typically between 10 and 20 districts within each state), and 1 speech is selected to advance from each district to a state level. At state, the speeches are narrowed one more time, to 1 person who advances to Nationals, as I’ll discuss in a moment.

I should add, before I talk about Nationals, that at many levels of competition, there are monetary prizes awarded in the form of college scholarship money—if you enter and actually try, it is not likely you will walk away empty-handed. Some posts will award a few hundred dollars, but that is not a given. Districts award several hundred (I received \$500 upon winning



district, but I've heard of some districts giving a few thousand). It is pretty standard for a state winner to receive somewhere between one and three thousand dollars, and many states award money in increments for the top five or so. There is a lot of variation, but if you're like me, you'll take what you can get when it comes to college scholarships.

If you win state, you can count on, in addition to the check that your state hands you, an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington D.C., as well as a baseline check of another \$1000. There are various increments of prizes at Nationals, ranging from \$1000 up to \$30,000 which is what the winner receives.

## Writing at Last

The prompt for the 2014 contest was, "*Why Veterans matter to our nation's history and future.*" Seems easy enough, right? Wrong. See, one of the big points that these speeches were judged on was originality. So with a pretty standard and easy to answer prompt, you can count on someone else having the first 5-10 things you think of covered pretty thoroughly, and if you want those originality points, you better avoid those easy-to-come-up-with approaches. That's more easily said than done.

It took many conversations with family members (thank you parents and sister) to get those ideas flowing. Maybe one of the most original points that we came up with was the last one I talked about—veterans having a solid and firsthand experience of history, and their ability to solidify our understanding. I never heard anyone else talk about that in the whole competition. It isn't easy to come up with something original—in fact, aside from picking a topic (something I didn't have to do in this competition), it's the hardest part.

As an individual, I have a great love of America, and thus the people who protect and defend America are very important to me. I knew my speech would be judged by veterans from both sides of the political aisle; I didn't want to not be potent enough to convey my true feeling, but I didn't want to say anything politically charged about a particular war, either. So by finding out what the judges were judging on, and who the judges were, I was able to know what things to avoid. The judging criteria are available on the web site: imagination, human interest, organization, smooth transitions, credibility, and of course originality are all awarded points on a certain scale.

In Lincoln-Douglas debate, Parliamentary debate, and any of the other Stoa events that I compete in, I come off as very stonefaced. I didn't want to be the boring guy giving a patriotic but generic speech for a contest. The boring generic type does not win contests—they go home. What would be the logical thing to do? Go emotional and passionate.

My family, debate partner, or coaches can attest to the fact that for me, vocally conveying passion does not come naturally to me. Something big that I learned is that if you let yourself go—let ‘er rip as we sometimes say—you can do a lot more. Get into it. But you’ll need a speech to let rip before that’s very helpful.

Whenever I do any writing at all—this, a platform speech for Stoa competition, a debate case, or a term paper for philosophy class for example—I do it out loud in my head. I write with the voice in my head reading it, and that seems to help make it flow more naturally. Thinking about how you want the speech to sound is useful before you write it. I wanted to be passionate and emotional, so I had to write using words that would allow me to convey that emotion. If your words and your delivery match—your words are gripping and your tone is energetic, involved, and passionate—you probably are going to do much better than someone with a gripping script and deadpan delivery, or vice versa.

## **Increasing Potency**

Whether you’re writing a 10-minute platform for NCFA or Stoa or a 5-minute speech to record for the VFW, there will always be more to talk about, and not enough time. Can’t exactly go over time, though, so you have to increase what you say without increasing your airtime. What I mean is more easily said than done: make your words succinct and powerful. I could go on listing adjectives but that’s counter intuitive. Be very short and sweet, because it truly is hard to beat. In my speech, as you’ll see shortly, I have a section where I really tried to paint a picture that I knew my audience would connect with. And they did.

Whenever I deliver my speech in person, I see tears streaming down the faces of veterans—of grown men and women who have been through things a lot harder than speaking for five minutes at a banquet. These people have seen war and death, some of them have been injured, and yet they’re gripped by words painting a picture in their mind. Whatever your prompt is, I urge you to strive to not just engage your audience’s ears, but their mindseye as well.

## **Prime Time**

There is no better time than the present. Start preparing sooner rather than later—this is something I mentioned earlier, but I cannot stress it enough. This contest is seemingly low pressure and commitment because it’s a short essay that you don’t have to memorize or deliver in person. You might have the tendency to wait until the last week or even the last day or two to write this bad boy, but that is a patently bad idea. Still, it’s what I did. Let me tell you just a few of the reasons to do as I say, not as I did.

1. **Original Ideas**—remember what I said about having fresh ideas in a speech? Unless you're abnormally brilliant and can think of unique ideas better than everyone else in significantly less time, you probably will need a couple of weeks to think of ideas to put into your speech. Ask family, friends, relatives, people at work, whomever you think might have a thought you could use. Don't rush the thought process, or you'll be rushed out of the tabulation process and sent home sooner than you wanted to be.
2. **Family Stress**—this one isn't a joke. I have five siblings, so there are eight people living under this roof. When even one of them is stressing out or behind on something, it has a negative impact on the whole atmosphere. I'm not your parent, a socialist, or a family counselor, but I have enough experience in the procrastination realm to know that it isn't fair to the rest of your family for you to procrastinate on this speech writing.
3. **Why Wait?**—in Stoa, many of us think that waiting is great. Well this isn't Stoa, even if that were true. There is no reason to wait until next week to write this speech—you won't be any less busy or more brilliant then, so go ahead and start now.
4. **Firey Delivery**—In a contest where there are over 40,000 participants nationally each year, you have to stand out if you want that handsome thirty grand. Once you have that speech written and at its prime, you're going to want to nail the delivery—and take it from me, that takes a few tries. You want to be absolutely tearing it up when you deliver that speech, not worrying about getting the words in the right order. That takes practice, so leave some time for that, and be patient with yourself.

## Something Useful

Now that I've talked about being short and sweet, allow me to be that for you and write just a couple of things to refer to as you write your own winning speech.

**Word economy**—you only have about 750-800 words. Those have to be organized, paint pictures, and leave the judges something to remember, so make them count.

**Don't kill yourself**—I know, not something most people think about doing every day, but I'm talking about it this way: you have high expectations for yourself, and you really can do this. Just give yourself some time and some grace if you don't nail the delivery. Stop and start the recording over if you have to—there is no shame in that.

**Think about your judges**—they are veterans from various wars. You won't know names, but that's who they are. They might be conservative or liberal, male or female, old or young. Be sure to speak clearly and slowly enough that they can understand you, and make your content specific to who they are.

**Speak the truth**—whatever the prompt is for the year you decide to compete, speak what you and God will be proud of. It doesn't matter if it's what you think everyone *wants* to hear, just speak the truth and it will defend itself.

## **The Speech, As Scripted for the 2015 Voice of Democracy Competition**

My first taste of “American Pride” was when I was 12, at the grocery store with my mom. We went to the food court for dinner, and noticed an elderly man with a WWII veteran's cap on. We approached him and introduced ourselves, and as I shook his hand, my heart swelled with pride. I was proud of my country. I was proud of the man whose strong hand was wrapped around mine. I was proud of the men and women who represented America by joining the armed forces. I'll never lose this pride. I will always be a patriot, a lover of the red, white, and blue, and an admirer of our veterans.

Our national anthem calls America the land of the free and the home of the brave, but America can only be free if she is brave. Economics tell us that nothing is free. There's no such thing as a free lunch—everything must be bought with a price. The same is true of freedom; our veterans have bravely sacrificed everything to pay the price for freedom. Courageous men and women like the one I met at the grocery store are the reason that America can still be free.

Throughout history, in wars like Vietnam, World War II, Afghanistan, and Iraq, our love for freedom has been tested. Enemies of liberty have sought to snuff out the light. However, proud representatives of America have ventured through jungles where armed enemies lurked in the unknown ready to strike and disappear. They have charged onto beaches under heavy machine gun and artillery fire where they knew they probably wouldn't make it out alive. They have colored the ocean red with their blood—shed for the liberty of people they will never meet. Thanks to them, my family can go to church on Sunday. Thanks to our veterans, I have no fear of being caught praying. Thanks to our veterans, I can say what I want, when I want, and where I want; thanks to our veterans, I am free.

Veterans used to get the attention they deserve. When a man returned home from fighting on the front lines, his family and friends would throw a welcoming celebration, he was thanked many times, and his face might even appear in the newspaper. Now it seems that even though we have a national holiday for them, veterans aren't appreciated, respected, or thanked. A

failure to celebrate veterans is a failure to raise up the next generation. If future leaders don't understand the sacrifice necessary to maintain a free nation, no one will make that sacrifice later on down the road. We won't be able to remain the land of liberty, if veterans of tomorrow don't rise up, and if we fail to instill patriotism in our young.

America is only as free as she is brave. I met a veteran, and that made me want to be brave. Veterans not only protect us by fighting, they lead the next generation of patriots. Without veterans, my generation—the leaders of tomorrow—will not know what honor looks like. We will not grasp the idea of bravery. We will not have the dedication to answer the call of duty, to stand up and say, “I will go,” when terrorists fly airplanes into our buildings. No one will care. No one will be brave.

Freedom isn't free. This means that veterans must continue to rise up if America is to remain the great land of liberty. Currently, the United States has Special Operations Forces in at least 134 countries around the world. Without them, the dark forces seeking to extinguish the flame of liberty will be successful.

Recently, in a school district not far from my home, students began protesting because their history textbooks were misrepresenting historical events. Veterans could stop that, because they made history—they were there, and witnessed it firsthand. If we take the time to listen to their stories and ask them about their lives, we can learn what really happened. We don't have to rely on hear-say to know the facts, when we have the authors of history among us. These heroes deserve to be heard, and we are foolish if we don't take advantage of the opportunity.

As a high school student, everything I do is motivated by the future. I plan my future, I prepare for my future, and it is easy to take my future for granted. It's easy to assume I'll have a future. It's easy to assume I'll have an America to live in when I'm older. Reality is, though, that freedom is not free—America is only as free she is brave. Veterans are the backbone of America. Veterans provide the truth and inspiration necessary to maintain my generation's American Pride.

## **Closing**

To learn more about this contest, visit [www.VFW.org/VOD/](http://www.VFW.org/VOD/). You can watch me deliver my speech at the National award ceremony in Washington, D.C., listen to the recordings of any of the other state winners, learn more about the judging criteria and how the contest works, and download the entry form. The 2015-16 topic is “My Vision for America.”

I suppose one final note I'd like to leave you with is this—there is no reason not to dive in and go for this contest. I'm no advertisement, and they didn't tell me to say this, but it truly is an

awesome process to go through, and I personally highly encourage every high school student who hasn't already put away every penny they need for college to enter. Remember to speak truth and life, even if you don't think it's what the audience wants to hear, and honor God through it all whether your entry stops at post or flies all the way to the top of Nationals. That, in my belief, is truly the top goal, and the first thing you should seek. Honor Him, and He will reward you beyond your wildest dreams.

**WATCH IT on Youtube!**

**[www.trainingminds.org/bronze15/adam-densmore](http://www.trainingminds.org/bronze15/adam-densmore)**

# “Godly Grieving”

—  
by Maggie Topper

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## An Original Oratory Speech

- ❖ Ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> Place in California, 3<sup>rd</sup> Place in the nation.<sup>2</sup>
- ❖ Tournaments: The Desert Gem (1st), Veni Vidi Vici (1st), Point Loma Classic (2nd), Inland Club Challenge (2nd), Christmas Colloquium (3rd)

## Behind The Scenes

On May 9th, my best friend who had been battling cancer for seven years, passed away. This was less than two weeks before NITOC 2014. It didn't come as a substantial shock, as we knew Karina was reaching the end in those last few months, but it was still the most excruciatingly painful day of my life. I wasn't sure how I was going to be able to compete at Nationals when I could barely cope with each passing day, even as the tournament approached. Astoundingly, God

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<sup>2</sup> <http://speechranks.com/profile/view/1663>

carried me through that final tournament of the year and He carried me through the harrowing summer that followed.

Learning how to grieve in a godly manner was territory I never expected I would have to explore at 16 years old. One of the great difficulties is that grief is not a commonly spoken-of topic in Christian and homeschooling communities, and there are not very many healthy, God-centered resources on it. Because I had to wade through this experience with only the guidance of my loving parents, mending for myself when there weren't answers, I often felt very alone. Of course, my mother and father provided wonderful advice and support, but they didn't know what it was like to be a teenage girl losing your closest friend. Confused and lonely, I spent many days cooped up in my room trying to distract myself with books. Whenever I left the house to go to church, spend time with people, or attend events, I felt estranged from those around me. I didn't know how to handle my grief, and most of my friends didn't know how to handle me. This is when it dawned on me that grief is just a very uncomfortable subject, and very few people know how to handle it.

Ultimately, my mother gave me the idea of writing the Original Oratory. She wisely saw that the task of preparing this speech would both help me process my own grief and provide more insight on an unspoken subject in our community. She was right.

While I was presenting my OO for the first time, I was shaking like a leaf, my throat was tightening, and I was practically spitting the words out of my mouth. It's not the best memory. While it got easier to give as the season progressed, there were many rounds (often outrounds, as God's will would have it) that I almost fell apart - stuttering through every sentence, forgetting pertinent parts, and feeling sobs welling up in my chest. However, God was faithful and it often turned out that the presentations I felt were executed most poorly were the ones in which I received the highest ranks.

Where I saw only pain, God saw a purpose. This speech was immensely beneficial for me spiritually and emotionally, and it opened up so many doors for edifying conversations with people at tournaments.

## Selecting a Sensitive Speech

While there is an *endless* amount of subjects to pick from for a platform speech, they can generally be broken down into “emotional” topics or “intellectual” topics. For example, speeches on abortion, homosexuality, purity, modesty, adoption, or pornography would all fall into the emotional-speech category. Speeches on the Constitution, games, historical events/people, or science would generally fall into the more intellectual-speech arena. One sign of a great



speechwriter is someone who can give an academic speech at least a mite of emotional appeal or vice-versa. However, a speech of sensitive subject matter can be a real struggle. I've always picked sensitive speech topics, and it has taken me years to bring my speeches to a place where they are emotional, yet educational and helpful at the same time. If you are thinking about choosing more poignant subject matter for your speech, there are three keys you must always remember.

1. **DO Be Sincere, DON'T Be A Sham** - This speech should be close to your heart. I cannot emphasize that enough. If the topic is not something you have a strong personal connection or experience with, then you shouldn't be picking it. Emotional speeches are going to be emotionally taxing, so you have to really care about it if you're going to stick with it for an entire season. Plus, your audience *knows* whether or not you really care about the speech. Sincerity is almost impossible to fake, and it sets apart the subpar speakers from the fantastic ones. Of course, it's only one element of being a champion speaker, but it's irreplaceable.
2. **DO Illuminate, DON'T Manipulate** - It is a tragic sight when a speaker is hoping the emotional appeal of their content will carry them through to winning. No, doing a speech on abortion does not automatically ensure you first place! The national champions who win with heart-wrenching speeches *always* have educational, fresh subject matter that not only wins the audience's hearts, but their minds as well. We are not speaking to manipulate people's emotions, we are speaking to edify, inform, and build up our hearers.
3. **DO Be Purposeful, DON'T Be Frivolous** - You must determine an objective for your speech. What do you want to accomplish? Perhaps there's an important lesson you want people to learn, new information on a sensitive subject you want them to be aware of, or a change they need to make in their life. Whatever your purpose, it must be there. Don't just give an emotional speech because you're hoping to succeed competitively.

## **“You Can't Please Everyone”**

There's an irritatingly catchy Rick Nelson song from the 70s called “Garden Party,” in which the most commonly repeated line is, “You can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself.” Clearly, this is not written from a very Christian perspective, so I often change that second line to, “you've got to please the Lord” when I sing it to myself. While this is an important fact to remember in all of life, I have found it is very valuable to keep in mind in the process writing and re-writing your speeches. The hard truth is that no matter how hard you work on fine-tuning

your speech and implementing suggestions from your judges and coaches, there will always be that one person who just isn't happy with it. I can't tell you how many times I've come home from a tournament, read my ballots, and found lots of completely contradictory opinions from different judges. One judge commenting, "you should cut this part out" while another writes "\_\_\_\_\_ was my favorite part!" referring to the same exact section. What do you do? You just can't please everyone, and so you have to make sure that you are pleasing the *Lord* first and foremost. There are a few questions to ask yourself before implementing suggested changes:

***Is there a substantial consensus on this change?***

Do several people seem to agree? Bring it to your family and coaches and see what they think.

***Does it accomplish your goal for the speech?***

As I mentioned earlier, you need to have a purpose/objective for your speech. When you are considering utilizing a suggestion that encourages a dramatic change to your speech, make sure it is consistent with your goal.

***Does it stay true to what you want to convey?***

Never implement a change that you aren't thrilled with. You are the one presenting the material, you need to care about it and be comfortable with it. Otherwise, you cannot be sincere in your delivery of the speech.

***Does it glorify God?***

This may seem like a no-brainer, but it is easy to forget. I have gotten many suggestions on changes to my speeches that might make them more "universally appealing," but ultimately would detract from or thwart truth. Make sure you are never compromising truth in your speech to cater to other people.

## **The Slump Months**

If you are a seasoned competitor, you likely know all too well what it means to "plateau" with a prepared speech. If you're new, then you will experience this during the first year you compete with a platform. There comes a time, whether it's after one tournament, one month, or a whole semester, where you just feel like you're in a slump when it comes to your speech. You feel like you've lost your passion for the topic, and each speech feels like a drag. From my own experience, and the many other competitors I've discussed this with, this happens to everyone, no matter how much you care about your topic, and no matter what year of competition you are in. When you reach this point, it can be easy to want to give up. I almost did, several times, even though I really loved my speech. This "plateauing" is perhaps the hardest part of platform speeches, because it feels impossible to get out of the slump. You have a couple options: you can

scrap the speech and find a new topic, or you can push through and hope your enchantment with the speech returns. If you've picked a topic you *really* believe the Lord has led you to speak on, then you have to persevere through the slump. There are a few things you can do to lessen the burden and wade through the swamp of apathy a little quicker.

1. **Pray.** Bring your speech to the Lord in prayer, and ask Him to renew your heart for your topic.
2. **Revise.** Try to spice it up a little, and think of something you can add to make it more interesting for *you*.
3. **Step Back.** Sometimes the best thing you can do is just take a break from your platform. Don't practice obsessively. Maybe even forgo giving your platform at one tournament. Stepping back for a short time to re-orient yourself can do a world of difference in going uphill from that plateau.

*Colossians 3:17, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."*

## **The Speech, As Scripted at 2014-2015 Tournaments**

Have you ever had a dream come true? Joe Stafford had his life-long dream come true on his 56th birthday. He finally got the Harley-Davidson motorcycle he had always wanted. But two days later, he was rushed to the hospital because of an aortic aneurysm. In just a few short hours, he was gone. His daughter, Jessie, was lost in a sea of grief and pain that she'd had no way to prepare for. I wish... I had done more to help her.

Why is it that so many of us feel awkward or powerless to help loved ones through their pain? Handling grief and comforting others in pain is essential to the human experience. The first thing we will be covering today are some tools for evaluating painful circumstances. Then we'll discuss some common mistakes that we need to steer clear of when attempting to comfort others who have suffered loss. After that we'll explore a pitfall to avoid when handling our sorrow. Grief has been very close to me this past year. My best friend, Karina, passed away last May after a 7-year cancer battle. Several months later, my good friend Jessie lost her father. I guess that's when I realized how common grief is. It will strike every human being in their lifetime. Yet, in my experience, we don't give much discussion to grief in the Christian community. But I want to talk about the issue, because I believe that *it is profoundly important to know how to approach grief, like all parts of life, in a manner that glorifies our Savior.*

Susan was recovering from breast surgery. Numerous friends called asking to visit her, but Susan just wasn't in the mood for visitors. One woman replied to the rejection of a visit saying "You know this isn't all about you, right?" The comment hurt, but Susan soon realized how wrong it was of that woman to make the comment. Inspired by this, psychologist Susan Silk invented a technique she calls, "The Ring Theory." It is a tool to help individuals better interact with friends or loved ones in painful circumstances. Intuitively, most people know not to turn to someone for comfort in a crisis when they are at the very core of the situation. But who would you ask? Sometimes, we just don't know who to go to. That's where the Ring Theory can be extremely helpful. When you find yourself faced with tragic circumstances, follow these steps: Imagine in your head a small ring. This ring represents the person at the core of the trouble. In Susan's situation, this is her. Now imagine several larger rings expanding from the center. Each larger circle represents the people next closest. This could be the spouse, children, relatives, friends, co-workers, et cetera. Now figure out where on the diagram you lie. Then the rules are simple. Susan explains them as this: "When you are talking to a person in a ring smaller than yours.. the goal is to help... If you want to cry...[or] tell someone how shocked you are, do it to someone in a bigger ring. The key is this: Comfort IN, dump OUT." This way, we avoid burdening those already overwhelmed, and we know who can go to as an outlet for our own grief. Then we can truly turn to giving support to those around us suffering.

But when someone we love is mourning, words of comfort rarely flow naturally. That's okay. But we need to be careful to avoid clichés that will unintentionally do more harm than good. Phrases like, "Time will heal the pain" or "God works everything out for good" are rarely helpful, even if they're true. At times it can be tempting to tell someone they have no reason to be mourning. Hopefully you're thinking, "That's ridiculous! Who would ever be so insensitive as to tell someone they shouldn't be grieving?" Sadly, this can be a cliché of Christians when trying to comfort someone who has lost a loved one. Telling them, "You have nothing to cry over, you should be rejoicing that you'll see them again in heaven!" C.S. Lewis explains the problem with this type of comforting in his book, "A Grief Observed," putting it in the terms of a mother who has lost her child. He writes: "If a mother is mourning not for what she has lost but for what her dead child has lost, it is a comfort to believe that the child has not lost the end for which it was created. But [it is] not [a comfort] to her motherhood. The specifically maternal happiness must be written off. Never, in any place or time, will she have her son on her knees, tell him a story, plan for his future, or see her grandchildren." While Christians can rejoice for what their departed loved ones have gained, we must still be sensitive to their earthly loss of that person and allow them their grief. And finally, if you can't find anything to say to a mourning friend, I've found that the best thing to do is just give them a chance to talk.

But comforting others is only half of the equation. What if you are the person needing comfort? I want to be incredibly sensitive as I express this point, because I understand that everyone experiences grief in their own way. However, as Christians, we carry a great responsibility - we are called to glorify our Father in all things and at all times—even times of sorrow and tragedy. Theologian R.C. Sproul explains the greatest mistake we can make while grieving when he says, “Though grief may reach to the roots of our souls... there must be no place in the soul for bitterness.” While I have been grieving over the loss of my friend Karina, it has been tempting to grow resentful towards God, or toward friends who had seemingly deserted me. And at the times I had allowed that seed of bitterness to grow, I saw the poisonous effects that it had on me. Bitterness completely halts the healing process. But more than resisting it, we are called to combat bitterness with thankfulness! Paul told the persecuted church in Thessalonica who was suffering great losses, that they should “in everything give thanks.” Pastor Robert Hood applies this to grieving when he says, “[There are] the five stages of grief - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. But for the Christian, I believe there is a sixth stage - thankfulness.” In the months immediately after Karina passed away, I learned that when I was tempted to grow resentful, I needed to turn immediately to something I was thankful for. And I soon realized that there were many things to give thanks for - the fact that I had met her, the lessons I learned from her, and the joy she brought to my life. In giving thanks for those, I could fight the bitterness that tried so hard to take root in my heart.

In these several minutes together, we’ve looked at some tools in handling loss - both of others and our own. But I don’t want all of this speech to simply remain an abstract concept in the back of your mind. At any given time, most people have someone in their social circle who is suffering loss or pain in some way. Think of who that is for you, and figure out where you fall in the rings of people close to them. I would challenge you to consider ways you can encourage and help that person. I’d like to leave you with an insightful comment from pastor Tim Keller, “Grief is not to be eliminated, but seasoned and buoyed up with love and hope.”

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