

My Biggest Fee Ever

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He suffered burns to 65% of his body in a terrible motor cycle accident. The, he was involved in a plane crash and paralyzed from the waist down. In spite of his fate, today, Mitchell travels the world spreading his message of hope. He claims, "It's not what happens to you in life, it's what you do about it."

"Adversity reveals genius."

Horace

You might be surprised to learn that my favorite speaking jobs are not for a large corporations that happily shell out my standard fee, (more than most people earn in a month). Rather, it's the barn at the Griffith Canter, near Denver, where I speak for free.

It's a canter for kids who have literally been thrown on the junk pile. They have been beaten, abused, neglected, thrown out and this canter is their last chance. Many of these kids have been 'programmed' in a million ways, both direct and subtle, to believe that life has stacked the deck against them and that only a chump wastes time trying to learn how to make a contribution.

And then they see me A mutilated face. No fingers. A wheelchair. And I am a happy man. A man who had every excuse in the world to be miserable and refused them all.

Bringing back memories...

Every time I stand in front of kids, I am transported back in time to that day years ago when I walked by the playground and heard the chant of, "Monster, monster." How I longed to speak to those kids and gently show them how wrong they were.

I take a moment and catch my breath, because my dream is coming true. I'm here. I'm talking to them. I've got their attention. I tell them about my accidents. I explain, in great detail, the many opportunities I had to quit and how and why I refused to take them. But I don't just talk about myself.

I tell them about John Thompson, the 18 year old North Dakota farm boy who was on the farm by himself while his parents visited a friend in hospital. He was doing his chores, which included loading grain into the barn. He remembers turning on the auger, a huge screw inside a cylinder that carries grain into a silo. His shirt tail was hanging out. It got caught in the auger and began pulling him into the machinery.

He resisted, he fought but it pulled him harder and harder. He doesn't remember much else but he was spun five times and then thrown to the ground. He looked to his right and saw that his right arm was gone. He struggled to his feet, standing there, shaking. He looked to his left. Most of that arm was gone, too. Still he didn't quit. He ran 400 yards up the hill to his house. With

what little was left of one of his arms, he tried and tried again to open the sliding glass door. He couldn't but once again, he refused to quit. He ran around to the side door and managed to open the screen door; he still doesn't remember how.

Once inside the kitchen, he knocked the phone off the cradle and tried punching the buttons with his nose but when that didn't work, he didn't quit. He looked around, found a pencil, and picked it up in his teeth, and pressed buttons on the phone with the eraser. He called his cousin's house, and when the cousin answered, he shouted, "This is John! Get help, quickly, I've had a terrible accident!" Then, he had the presence of mind to pick up the receiver with his teeth and hang up, remembering that on their party line, if he didn't break the connection, his cousin couldn't make a call.

Then, John Thompson, this 18 year old high school senior, this average kid who got Cs in his classes and had never impressed anyone as anything special, went into the bathroom and sat in the bathtub so that he wouldn't bleed on his mother's rug.

When the paramedics pulled back the shower curtain, they were so shaken that he had to calm them down, telling them where his arms were and where there was ice in the refrigerator and garbage sacks in which to pack them. His arms were reattached in a six-hour operation. When, weeks later, a reporter asked him how it felt to be a hero, the question seemed to baffle him. "I'm no hero", he said sincerely. "I did what anyone would have done."

He had a point. He was and is a regular kid, who has the same resources any of us have. And I'm a regular guy, who has the same resources you do. The point I make to these kids is that we are not heroes, we are not different from you. We just chose to do what we needed to do.

You can, too. I can't help everyone. But some of these kids, these beautiful kids, with strong bodies and active minds, have just enough sensitivity left to see the significance of what I am and what I am saying to them. Sometimes (and they are magical times), I know that I have gotten through to them in time. The core memory is not entirely buried under reams of negativity. There is a chance for my message to get through.

My biggest fee ever...

The biggest fee I have ever been paid as a speaker was at the first talk I ever gave at the center. I didn't know much about the place and I agreed to speak without a real clue. As I drove there, I worried. Here I was, starting my speaking career, unsure of myself, unsure if this speech that I had crafted for adults, would mean anything to kids, particularly hardened kids like these.

When I finished my talk, I could plainly see that I had made an impact. I could see it on those faces looking back at me. But the final confirmation - the greatest fee - was the reaction of a 13 year old kid, clearly from the inner city, who came up to me after the speech with tears in his eyes.

He told me that he had tried to commit suicide three times. I was amazed at his story but from the way he told it, it was clearly true. Then, he said, if he ever felt like doing something like that again, he was just going to stop and remember what I had said that day.

Now both of us had tears in our eyes.