

BEYOND BORDERS

Exploring culture, countries and comfort zones

It's All in the Process

Where does inner strength come from? As speakers, we constantly indulge ourselves in books, educational CDs, seminars, workshops and conventions, and then set off to help create change in others. But what do you do when your best doesn't seem good enough and achieving your dream as a professional speaker seems like a pipe dream? Or a personal tragedy strikes and shakes your very core? You must develop willpower to transcend any challenge in your path.

As a former athlete, I believed that I'd been challenged with every obstacle a person could face. Born and reared in a ghetto, I reached the pinnacle of college athletics by earning scholarships to more than 30 colleges. I chose the University of Minnesota and led the team to its first bowl game in 16 years.

After football, I enjoyed an outstanding career in corporate America for more than 20 years as an executive with four *Fortune* 500 companies, and a successful career as a professional speaker, earning my CSP in 2001, and being inducted into the CPAE Speakers Hall of Fame in 2004. Then, the unthinkable happened.

In 2005, I had a devastating accident that changed my life forever. I tumbled off a ladder and broke two vertebrae in my neck. I found myself in the hospital, completely paralyzed. The things we speakers do for new material!

After 14 hours of surgery, I woke up in the ICU with a metal and fiberglass

apparatus bolted into my skull, extending down to my waist. Each day I lay motionless in searing pain and deep despair, pondering my future. "Great, a motivational speaker who is depressed. This really works well!"

One day, my neurosurgeon, Stephen Haines, M.D., head of the department of neurosurgery at the University of Minnesota, told me that many of his patients will never walk or raise their arms again simply because they won't go through the slow, painful rehabilitation process for fear that it won't work.

Instead, they choose to lie in bed or sit in a wheelchair for the rest of their lives.

Dr. Haines shouted, "Who is Desi Williamson? You've got to do all of those things you've been telling everybody else to do!" At that moment, I realized that for things to get better, I had to change.

After three months in the hospital and 18 months of intense rehab, which still continues to this day, I am a walking example that willpower, inspiration and the ability to go through the process of transformation determine your outcome in life. Failure strikes when people want the end result without going through the process. Some people want to become successful speakers, for example, without experiencing any of the trials and tribulations. They refuse to grow and challenge themselves. It was the specter of future speaking engagements, however, that motivated me to endure the rehabilitation process.

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During this time, I became acquainted with Bill Gove, whose encouraging words, "Hear the beautiful truth!" provided me with a great deal of comfort. I continually challenge myself in the speaking profession today by adhering to his following pearls of wisdom:

- The enemy of speakers is sameness.
- An amateur speaker comes before an audience and says, "Here I am!" A professional says, "There you are!"
- Always know what comes next.
- Don't be afraid to pause. Bill would say, "Desi, slow down!"

Hopefully, my story will inspire you with the willpower and inspiration to keep striving, knowing that there's a process for everything, including the speaking business.

Desi Williamson CSP, CPAE, is president of Impact!! Seminars Unlimited, Inc. He is a keynote speaker and trainer for corporations and associations. He is the author of Get Off Your Assets! . . . How to Deal with the Challenges of Life and Win! He can be reached at 952-926-5100 or desiw@earthlink.net

