

How I Learned to Speak in Public

As a child I was extremely shy and small for my age. I rarely spoke up in groups. In the late 1950s there were Christian clubs in all the Minneapolis junior high and high schools and in many of the inner ring suburbs. The adult leader was a short, friendly, energetic man by the name of Jerry Coffman. He played the accordion and piano, leading students in singing praise songs popular at that time. He also asked us to memorize Bible verses and encouraged those who were willing to put in the effort.

I wanted to accomplish this and caught Jerry's attention. In my junior year at Washburn high school, he asked me to run for one of the three citywide vice president positions. I didn't say no, did not think I would be elected and did not know what to expect if I was.

A vote was taken at a citywide meeting held at the Roosevelt auditorium. I remember stepping up to the podium when given the signal, leaning forward, staring at the microphone and saying, "My name is Ross Olson." When I looked at the audience, people had started to laugh.

The amazing thing is that I did not panic. I paused, started over and again they laughed. When later thinking back on the episode, the reasons were probably that I was very short (barely showing up over the podium) and my voice had not changed yet. But what came to my mind was, "This is interesting. I can make people laugh."

Another piece to the puzzle is that at our church the youth pastor's policy was that every highschooler should have a ministry and he had assigned me to children's church. I had already experienced talking to a group of 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders before being forced to confront a crowd of my peers.

I was elected, probably based on name recognition. It gave me a boost of confidence. That year, I got to see what happened at the leadership level of the organization, found that I could offer ideas and suggestions and began to believe that God had given me abilities that could be of help to other people.

I continued to teach children's groups at church for the better part of 50 years. I also brought in guest speakers from the church to teach topics I could have done myself but did it to give those people the opportunity to start with "small" audiences. I included as speakers young people that I have taught and wanted to encourage. I also started to speak on neglected or ignored subjects that I had researched because it became apparent that the real story needed to be known. It all started because of Jerry Coffman and his gentle push to the podium.

Jerry Coffman went on to start high school clubs in Thunder Bay Ontario, before returning to the Twin Cities to supervise clubs among Southeast Asian ethnic minorities. When Jerry later developed dementia, he continued to play the piano in his memory care unit until the day he died, leading all the "former young people" in the same praise songs.

Ross Olson