The Long and Winding Road to the Speaker's Podium

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Adapted from the Genealogical Speaker's Guild luncheon program at the 2010 FGS conference in Knoxville, Tennessee.

I would like to tell you that I found the magic formula to have your lecture proposals selected to speak at a national or regional conference. Unfortunately, I do not have the answer and neither has anyone I have asked. A number of people who found out I was selected to speak this week asked me how I broke through the glass ceiling. I know from past experience that even if you know the program chair, it is not a guarantee you will be selected to speak at the FGS conference in Knoxville. Even if you have been told you will be on the program, do not count on it until you see it in writing. It may not actually happen. Being a member of one of the host societies for the conference is also no guarantee you will be on the program.

My journey down the road to speaking at a national conference began in 1996 when I sent in proposals for the NGS conference that was being held the following May in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. I finally reached the podium at a national conference last year. Actually it was the International Conference of Jewish Genealogy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Thus the title of this presentation: *The Long and Winding Road to the Speaker's Podium*. For it has been a long road with twists and turns and surprises.

I belong to two genealogical societies in Fairfax County, Virginia, where I live. I have served on the conference program committee and the education committee for the Fairfax society. I also served on the program committee and chaired two conferences for the Mount Vernon society. I have attended between thirty-five and forty conferences at various locations in the last fifteen years. Along the way I have made some observations, gathered some statistics, and come up with some suggestions I would like to share with you.

There were 149 lecture time slots on the program for the 2010 FGS conference in Knoxville, not including the APG Professional Management Conference. Fifty-two of those lectures were sponsored by exhibitors and other organizations. That left ninety-seven lecture slots that were not sponsored and were available for other speakers to fill. According to the program committee, over 850 lecture proposals were received for those ninety-seven slots. Forty-eight speakers were selected to speak at the conference by the program committee.

These types of numbers are not unique to this conference. Other national conferences receive at least that many proposals. The competition for having your proposals selected and speaking at any national conference is going to be quite stiff. What do you need to do to be noticed and selected to speak?

Program chairs are always looking for new material to keep the programs interesting and to draw people back year after year. They do not want to have the same lectures conference after conference. When you submit your proposals, select topics that are unique or new. Sometimes you may have a topic that others have lectured on that you really want to present. Before sending in your proposal, go and listen to that other speaker. I have certainly done this, and I also know a number of

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other speakers who have done the same thing. In one instance a friend knew far more about the topic than the speaker and ended up answering most of the questions asked of the speaker.

This is not to say we need to know everything about the topic, but we need to have a general idea of what should be found in the records and not just in the area where we work. We should have an idea what is in those records in other places. For example: you do not have to know exactly how probate records were kept and recorded in every state. Some states may have recorded wills, codicils, and inventories in will books. Another state may only record the will and codicil in the will book. The inventories may be recorded in a separate book or only kept in the probate package. As a lecturer, you need not know what every state does, only that there are differences in the way states keep records so you can tell attendees what they might expect. Also, if you do not know the answer to a question, just say so. You may offer to find the answer and get back to the person. The attendees will respect you for being honest. They are not as forgiving if you fake an answer and it is wrong.

> Do you have a different way of looking at a topic or a unique way of using the records?

After attending someone else's program you must ask yourself, "Is my program really better?" Do you have a different way of looking at the topic or a unique way of using the records? If you do, then send in the proposal and tell the committee why your program is better and why it should be selected.

Unless you work extensively at a facility it is best not to compete with the staff that may be submitting proposals for lectures on records at those facilities. For example, people who work at the National Archives, Library of Congress, DAR Library, and archives and libraries in the area where the conference will be held are going to send proposals for lectures about their records. So it is best not to compete with them. Chances are your proposals will not be selected.

It sure would be helpful to speakers if the call for papers would include a good description of exactly what topics the program committee is looking for. Calls for papers with descriptions for lectures like research repositories, methodology or skill building, ethnic research, military records, immigration records, or computers do not tell potential speakers much about what the committee wants for the program. It would be helpful if they could give us a description of the tracks that are going to be presented, but often the tracks are decided from the proposals received. It is more helpful to the committee if you send in a group of proposals that could be used as a track, rather than a potpourri of topics that the committee will have to try to fit into a program track.

Every conference has a deadline for proposals and once that deadline is reached, the program committee has to read all the proposals and put the program together. That means there will be a lot of reading for the committee to do. As proposals come in, the committee can begin reading the proposals. By waiting until the deadline to submit your proposals, the pressure is greater on the committee to work fast to make selections and get the program together. Every program committee I know certainly appreciates receiving proposals early. Then they can begin reading, make notes, and plan the program without the pressure of last minute deadlines.

Was I really ready to be a national speaker back in 1996 when I sent my proposals in? At the time I thought I was, but in reality I was not. I had a lot to learn before I was really ready.

At the time I sent in those proposals, I was teaching genealogy for Fairfax County's Adult Education program. My first lecture before a genealogical society came in March 1998 when I volunteered to do a program on death and funeral home records for the Mount Vernon Genealogical Society. I also

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became the education chair for the Fairfax society the year before. At that time, being the education chair meant I was it—there was not a committee. For the most part I presented the quarterly education programs myself. The education programs have grown and today we have an actual committee and each month a different speaker.

In 2001 the Fairfax society expanded its annual conference to include a beginner's track of lectures. Several potential speakers were discussed by the conference committee, but I was the one selected to present the lectures. For almost ten years, I continued to present the beginner's track. No, not the same track of lectures, but different lectures related to the needs and interests of people just starting their research.

I have expanded my lecture topics beyond beginners and today I have about thirty lectures available. The word does get passed on. As a result of that conference in 2001, I began to be invited to speak at other local societies' meetings. Those invitations took me to a number of societies in Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Other opportunities also came along, including the Virginia Genealogical Society's spring conference in Richmond, the National Institute for Genealogical Research at the National Archives, commonly known as NIGR, and the Smithsonian Institute's continuing education programs.

Although I began to be asked to speak for different organizations, I often wondered whether I am as good as the people who know me think I am? After all, they are my friends. Are they being honest or just telling me what they think I want to hear? There is a way to get an unbiased opinion. Speak where the organization does a survey. This will get you an unbiased opinion. If none of the groups you speak for does a survey, ask if you can do your own.

You should realize up front that you will never make everyone one hundred percent happy. Some people will find something they do not like, no matter who the speaker is. Unless several people have the same complaint, chances are you are not really doing anything wrong. Remember that even well-known national speakers occasionally have someone that does not like something they have said or done.

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Speakers also have to be prepared for the inevitable disaster—not just the disasters that may happen on the way to the conference, like lost luggage that included needed equipment or delays in travel transportation. Imagine the surprise of one lecturer standing beside an overhead projector when the bulb blew up. About half way through my first lecture back in 1998 a rooster began to crow. It continued off and on for several minutes. Rather than get flustered, I stopped what I was saying until we found the culprit—someone's watch alarm. Many times since then, the program chair at the time, Julia (who is a very good friend today), and I have had a good laugh about that day.

I would like to say this was my only speaking disaster, but I cannot. At one lecture, although I had used my LCD projector a number of times, I learned the hard way not to let the computer go to sleep with the projector on. The two fell out of sync and nothing I did would get them back together. Fortunately the society had coffee and refreshments and I suggested they enjoy them while I worked on the problem. I had to restart everything to get the computer and projector back together.

Although disasters have been relatively few and far between, this year presented me with two. In February I arrived at the Mount Vernon society meeting to find that the power in half the building was out and, shortly after my arrival, the rest of the building lost power. Of course, my lecture depended heavily on graphic illustrations, and to make matters worse, I had used my laptop on the battery the day

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before and had not recharged it. I doubted I would be able to go through the program with the power left on the battery. I was not going to be able to use the computer to see my notes. Fortunately about five minutes before I was to go on, power was restored in the building. Now I never leave home for a lecture without a fully-charged battery.

The other disaster happened last May. I was to speak at the annual meeting of the Austin Family Association. Speakers need to be prepared for any situation. We never know what kind of a setup we will find at a lecture facility. I placed my laptop on a table and got everything set for the presentation. I knelt down to see the laptop and as I started to stand up I lost my balance and split my pants. No, not the seat—the inside of the right leg from mid-thigh to mid-calf. Since not everyone was in the room, I began that lecture with an explanation of what happened. I have considered adding a roll of duct tape to the other emergency items I carry with me. As speakers we have to learn to make the best out of any situation and sometimes laugh at our own misfortune.

As my resume of lectures and lecture venues continued to build, I continued to send proposals for national conferences. I still had not found the magic formula to be selected to speak at a national conference.

At the FGS Philadelphia conference in 2008 I picked up a brochure for the International Conference of Jewish Genealogy being held in 2009, also in Philadelphia. I planned to attend the conference but had not thought about sending lecture proposals for the conference. In January 2009, I was the guest on a local cable television genealogy show in Fairfax County, Virginia. Sidney and Arline Sachs, the producers, suggested that I send in proposals for the conference. They were going to send proposals themselves, so with their encouragement I decided I would also. I did not really expect to be selected. First, I was not Jewish and my lectures were not related to Jewish research. Second, I certainly doubted that anyone on the program committee would know who I was. Sidney and Arline's proposals were not selected, but much to my surprise, three of my proposals were. At last I was on a national program—actually, an international program.

Shortly after returning from ICJG I was notified that I was selected to be a speaker at the FGS conference in Knoxville and Gary Smith asked me to present the GSG luncheon program at the conference. After fourteen years I still do not know the magic formula for having my proposals accepted. The proposals I sent in for the Knoxville conference were the exact same proposals that I sent in for the FGS Philadelphia conference. None of those proposals were selected in Philadelphia, but three were selected for Knoxville.

So what is the answer? Almost every speaker will have their own answer. For those of you who have not been selected, I would say keep trying. Do not give up. Remember, you are not going to be selected unless you send in your proposals.

The road to the speaker's podium will be different for every speaker with different twists and turns. I wish each of you well as you travel down your own road to the podium.

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