

Mark Hunter wins 2009 Toastmasters contest

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Margaret Wenham

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MARK Hunter is proof positive of what can be achieved with a liberal dose of self-determination and an appreciation of the power of love.

The Brisbane primary school principal, who had to fight to continue teaching after a water skiing accident 30 years ago confined him to a wheelchair, has now become the public speaking world champion.

"I'm just floating, or wheelie-ing I suppose, four feet off the ground – it's awesome," the 58-year-old said yesterday from his hotel room in Las Vegas.

[Listen to Mark Hunter's speech on ABC Radio National](#) or read the text below

"I mean world champion is a mantle that's not earned by many people and in its current form it's never been picked up by an Australian – in fact, the title very rarely goes outside America."

The head of [Undurba State School](#) at Murrumba Downs won the coveted title on the weekend at the [2009 Toastmasters International Speech Contest](#) in Connecticut.

Mr Hunter, who has spent 36 years in a wheelchair since his accident as a 22-year-old, wooed the judges and the 1500-strong audience with a speech (**see below**) on his personal struggles and how he'd found a way of approaching life and making a difference.

"By using a unique definition of love, which accepts everybody for who and what they are, you can make the world a better place – you can move mountains by love, rather than tilting at windmills like Don Quixote," he said. Mr Hunter said he'd already qualified as a teacher when he fractured two vertebrae in his neck.

"I had difficulty getting back to teaching," he said. "There was no-one teaching from a wheelchair and there was a belief in the system it couldn't be done so I really had to fight for the right."

Mr Hunter said he loved teaching about as much as public speaking, which he'd taken up in 1995 and now did professionally as a side interest and business.

This year was his third attempt at the world championship, after coming third in 2007.

The title is particularly precious. Having gained the world championship, Mr Hunter is not allowed to compete for it again.

Mark Hunter's speech:

Literature is literally littered with lively legends. Amongst them rides Don Quixote the Man of La Mancha. An idealistic knight who fought for the rights of others and dared to dream the impossible dream.

Mr Contest chairman, ladies and gentlemen, while I dare not sing that song for fear it could be your nightmare, I like many of us here have dreamed impossible dreams. But to make one of my dreams even remotely attainable, I had to learn a lesson, perhaps a lesson for us all.

When I was 22 an accident changed my view of the world completely. Before the accident, I saw the world from an invincible 6 feet high, now I see it from the height of the consummate navel gazer.

In my new position, short and seated and recycled, I soon faced discrimination, so I became a modern day Don Quixote fighting for the rights of those with a disability. Many, many times, I would don the armour of righteousness, mount my trusty grey horse Eeaha! (work with me here), raise my lance, and charge into hell for my heavenly cause, dreaming of a world where discrimination no longer existed.

But at other times, I would retreat, exhausted and just want to be invisible

For many years as I championed this cause I faced this problem: Do I want to fit in, or do I want to stand up, stand out and stand fast for who and what I am; do I want to be same or different?

I became consumed by this dilemma and desperate for an answer. I turned to books, coaches, meditation, you name it I did it, I even searched in the bottom of a bottle of whiskey - I eventually found my answer where many of our life's most important questions are answered.

My Grandmother's kitchen was filled with the aroma of freshly cooked bread, and the quiet rhythmic chopping of vegetables was the only sound to be heard. On the bench, gleaming upturned jars were begging to be filled with her world famous tomato relish well I thought it was world famous my grandfather, Poppy, always said it could be used as paint stripper. I too would laugh at his mischief

A splash was followed by her silent invitation to look in the water filled sink. A wildly bright red apple had accidentally tumbled in, and was bobbing amongst a dozen green tomatoes. Nana said, Mark, look in the sink. What do you want to be? I looked at my choice to be the one apple or one of many tomatoes- and I remembered thinking..

Who looks at fruit and veges and becomes philosophical?

So how did I answer grandmother?

As I watched her, I finally understood her wisdom. Nana, I said. She stopped, turned, and waited. Nana, I want to be the water.

She turned back to her work, and I am sure I heard her smile.

She knew I had found my answer. That you cant change the world by charging around like an idealistic knight. You change it from here, by being the water. You see water embraces everything completely. It does not differentiate young from old, black from white, tall from navel gazer. It simply encompasses all.

And what is this water if is not a unique definition of love. A definition reflected in Deepak Chopras work, where he writes for love to be real it has to flow out and around what is loved. This water is liquid love. When I am the water, when we are the water, the need to fight the good fight no longer exists. The need to work out whether we are the same or different no longer exists. When we love with the intimacy of water, difference doesn't exist.

Its what this liquid love does. What happened in the kitchen allowed me to replace the passion of youth with the wisdom of my grandmother (maybe cut) and so with my new understanding I began to change my world from in here

Ladies and Gentlemen: In an ordinary kitchen, I learnt an extra-ordinary lesson. One which enabled me to take off my armour and get off this horse not literally. I learnt from my

grandmother that it doesn't matter how we are different. It's how we love that matters. So this morning, I offer you her wisdom. In a sink full of green tomatoes and one wildly red apple, there is so much, so very much to be gained from being the water.

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