

“Deadly Poison is a Healing Solution”

Toastmaster Presentation

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Mr. Toastmaster, Fellow members and guests.

What do you think of when you hear the word Botox? Wrinkles? Well...Botox isn't just for wrinkles. It is one of the deadliest poisons known to man. But, personally I love Botox. But I don't use it to try to regain a youthful appearance. Instead, I have Botox shots into my neck. You might notice that my voice is a little strange. I have a neurological voice disorder called spasmodic dysphonia. It is a form of dystonia which causes uncontrolled muscles spasms. In my case, the spasms are in my vocal cords.

My spasmodic dysphonia developed in 1989 after I had surgery. It began gradually with a strange feeling in my throat which my family physician dismissed. As time went on, I began running out of breath when I would talk. At the time, I was substitute teaching and also had a sales position. But it became increasingly difficult for me to do because I would be so exhausted after just a few sentences. I would have students continue reading for me and I began to cut my sales pitch short because I was so exhausted after just a short period of talking.

I thought I had a problem with my lungs and went for many tests. Tests for tuberculosis, emphysema, asthma, lung cancer, etc. But nothing was found. As time progressed, not only was I running out of breath, but also my voice began to break. My voice was very breathy. Some words didn't come out at all. So off to an ENT I went for another barrage of tests. There was no sign of polyps, nodules or anything out of the ordinary. No acid reflux, post-nasal drip or allergies. But after the tests were done, and no reason was found for my condition, I was told that I should go to a therapist because my problem was stress. And I can tell you that by that time, I was stressed! Because I had now had the problem for about five years – two of which I could barely speak.

During this time I was going to Kutztown University working on my Master of Education degree. When I needed to give any oral presentations in class, it was quite a struggle. As were any tasks that involved speaking. I couldn't give the waitress an order at a restaurant, I couldn't speak on the phone when I needed to, I couldn't read to my children. I couldn't yell for help if I needed it! I was beginning to withdraw because any social interaction was just too difficult.

At this time, I was also working in the camera and film department of our local Kmart.

One day when I was alone in the department, the phone rang. Usually I didn't answer the phone because no one could really understand me. But fate stepped in that day. As I answered the phone saying, “Cameras. Can I help you?” The man on the other end said, “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?” Having worked with the public for a long time, I was a little hesitant to say yes because you never know what kind of question you might get. But he asked me if I had a problem with my voice. And I was thinking, “Isn't it obvious?” but I just said, “Yes.” He

told me that I sounded just like his wife and that she had struggled with her voice problem for twenty years but had recently been diagnosed with spasmodic dysphonia. He said she was getting treatments and they were helping her. He gave me the name of a local doctor who was familiar with SD and also told me about Dr. Blitzer in NYC who gave his wife her Botox shots. I was so relieved to find that I was not alone and I was not losing my mind! So I began getting Botox shots and my voice doesn't sound totally normal but at least I can usually be understood. Although sometimes I still have trouble saying my own name.

Most people do not realize how important their voices are. And how much we depend on them. Most people don't realize how much we are judged by our voice. Except maybe Toastmasters members. Believe me, I have gotten all kinds of comments about my voice. People think I am laughing, crying, lying, a basket case, mentally deficient. You name it, I have heard it. Really it is none of those things. I just can't control my vocal cords. SD is embarrassing, frustrating and can definitely hinder your career goals. But it has given me a new appreciation for people with disabilities. And it has also given me a sense of how blessed I am. Unlike many other health problems, SD is not going to take my life nor will I let it take over my life.

So next time you hear about Botox, one of the deadliest poisons known to man, remember that besides being one of society's fountain of youth remedies, it can also be a healing solution. It can give someone back their voice.