



# THE FATHER *like daughter*

LEE ROBERT CARRIES ON HER FATHER'S LEGACY, WITH A UNIQUE SET OF TALENTS AND MESSAGES THAT ARE ALL HER OWN

BY MONICA WOFFORD, MA, CSP

**LEE ROBERT** has been intimately involved in the speaking business since 1960—though not always in the manner you might think. It was a family business, with the early beginnings started on the dining room table. She spent childhood summers being paid to send out her father's books and tapes, and later worked in his office in sales and marketing as an adult for 12 years.

Of course, it's not just the years of experience that mold her insights on the past, present and future of the speaking business. A professional musician since age 14, Lee began performing in

coffee houses. She lived, performed and received performing arts training in England for a number of years, and as an adult was encouraged to visit the San Francisco Chapter of the National Speakers Association while on tour with a 13-piece orchestra and seeking a new agent. Her father told her there might be agents at the NSA meeting. He also told her that he thought she was a great speaker and storyteller.

Then again, Lee's father was a man who told every speaker he met they were "great." Indeed, it's a vital part of his legacy, his inspiration, and the message

his daughter carries on. You see, Lee Robert is the daughter of NSA founder Cavett Robert, CSP, CPAE. She's not only living his legacy in the literal sense, but with her own style, message, and guidance on how we can sustain and grow our own seeds of "greatness."

Lee is quick with a story to convey her own version of his words of wisdom. "Back then, Daddy talked about the farmer standing out in the field holding a rope in his hand, and how he couldn't figure out if he'd lost a cow or found a rope," she says. "For us now, the same story holds true. Many of us are standing in the middle of our lives and careers, not able to understand whether we've lost our economic direction or found ourselves in a new era of operation we don't understand." In order to stay great when times change, no matter your message or medium for engaging an audience, Lee Robert believes her father's advice for being a speaker with staying power still applies.

## THE TOOLS OF INFLUENCE

Cavett Robert was always into high-tech stuff. When he started in the early '60s that meant 45 RPM records and film strips. Lee, a 10-year-old girl when her father launched his business, saw a different landscape when she came into the speaking realm: digital technology and murmurs of the internet. "I'm always using and learning brand-new techniques and mediums that my dad was never exposed to," she says. "But I've learned to think of all of them as simply tools to help me as a speaker. It's not about 'I'm a TV personality' or 'I'm a writer.' I use them as tools to influence. They communicate our message, and our message evolves as well, just as we evolve as human beings."

It's often said that the speakers who stay great are the ones who reinvent themselves by learning and applying new things. Not unlike her father, a lifelong learner who believed in lifelong learning



for all, she didn't learn the business of speaking until after she learned to perform her music. "Dad didn't start speaking as a profession until age 55, after retiring from the practice of law," Lee says. "He was at the height of his power and influence and fame at the age of 72. 'There is no excuse for anyone to say I am too old for anything,' he'd say. 'You're just wet behind the ears when you're 55!'"

## THE POWER OF NO

Success has a way of putting speakers in a position of wanting to say yes more often than perhaps they should—particularly because it's such a long process to develop a speaking business. As such, while Lee enjoys mixing music and speaking, invites come with a caveat. "Being a communicator can be a funny business, and one that's addictive," she says. "That makes learning how to say no one of the hardest things."

For Lee, declining an opportunity isn't about staying healthy or in balance: It's a matter of what her father extolled about following your heart and serving people. That principle can be applied to saying no to a topic that's not your gift, or to that one extra engagement for which you don't have the energy to give the audience what they deserve—even though you could use the money.

"If all you're trying to do is make a buck, then the bucks will run through your hands like water," Lee says. "But if you're interested in using your talents and constantly developing them to serve other people, then the dollars will hang around your back door, begging for your attention just to see what kind of person you are."

## AUTHENTICITY AND ATTENTION

"Be natural. Be who you are on purpose." To this day, her dad's words are music to Lee's ears. "If it's natural for you to lay on the floor and kick your legs," she says with a laugh, "then that's what you need to do." For Lee, that means delivering a blend of her musical talents as well as a

sense of humor and anecdotes reminiscent of her father's. While some speakers tell stories in a dramatic way, others use poetry and even physical movements to bring a similar effect. "What we're really trying to do is capture the eye and the ears of our audiences," she says. "There are so many ways of bringing their attention back, and of capturing their eyes and ears with the tools of influence we use." Being natural is part of the equation, as is taking care of yourself so the authenticity lasts long term.

Lee admits that it took her a while to be herself—and she's still learning. Cavett once told her, "Your topic has to be general enough to apply to different groups, but specific enough to be helpful to people." She first realized the power of this message when she returned home from a performance—only to learn that the family business, the Phoenix Summer Sales Program of her youth, had become the official National Speakers Association, providing general enough guidance to apply to many, but specific to the growing industry of speakers.

## SOWING SEEDS OF GREATNESS

Today, Lee Robert shares her message through storytelling and folk music, and is known for her own style and voice of "Cowboy Jazz." Her music has changed over the years, but so has her business—due in part to the fatherly wisdom she still hears echoing in her head. Her legacy hasn't changed, but how she shares it has. Her "seeds of greatness" haven't changed, but how she views them, as part of her own message and mentorship of others, has. She now focuses on making a difference in the lives of those with whom she

## STAYING CONDITIONED

Lee tells a story about how Cavett Robert wanted to be an Olympic athlete in high school. He loved track and field, and his mentor and coach would occasionally let him train with the Olympians. He heard the way they breathed, talked to them, kept step with them, watched them sweat—all of the things Cavett called "conditioning." He told Lee, "Conditioning is just as important as learning and stays with us so much longer. We cannot be exposed to the influence and love of each other and ever be the same again."

Lee still believes strongly that greatness comes from the conditioning that can only come from associating with skilled professionals at the top of their craft. "Unless we can rub elbows with champions, we don't get the conditioning," she says. "An organization like NSA gives us the information to learn and the conditioning."

shares her message—ensuring they, too, see their own seeds of greatness, live abundantly, and sustain their own ability to share their message.

"One of the benefits I have is seeing how the business has evolved over a number of years," she says. "When I started speaking, it was a brand-new world from what my father started 30 years prior. He never did tell me exactly what to do or how to do it, he simply believed in my seeds of greatness. He always nurtured my drive and ambition, just as he did for many others. And, yes, as many speakers joke about, he told me I was going to be great, too!"



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