

Trevor Parry-Giles, PhD

Find Your Own Voice

Toward the end of his freshman year of high school, a classmate in Trevor Parry-Giles' German class asked him a question that would change the course of his life. Back then, members of high school Speech & Debate clubs needed a debate partner to participate, and she was on the lookout for one. Had he ever considered joining the debate team? Trevor never had, but at her invitation, he decided to attend an after-school meeting. "That day sort of set the stage for my entire career," marvels Trevor, "Because were it not for my participation in competitive speaking and debating at the high school level, I never would've gone on to college on a debate scholarship. I never would have gone on to graduate school the way I did. So in many ways, I owe a lot to that conversation in my German class."

By junior year of high school, Trevor had already made a name for himself on the local debate circuit, but there was one competitor who always seemed to best everyone. A senior boy named Jerry from Santa Fe had become something of a legend, winning every tournament, placing first in every contest. Finally, at the State Tournament in Portales, New Mexico, Trevor approached a coach to ask for advice. "I asked him, 'what can we do about Jerry? He's winning everything!'", recalls Trevor, "and I remember it as clear as day, the coach told me, 'you need to stop trying to imitate what he is doing and find your *own* voice.'" Trevor took the coach's words to heart, and ended up beating Jerry in the State Tournament that year. "That single moment was very formative," reflects Trevor, "there was something empowering about that idea of finding your own style, finding your own voice and being comfortable with that."

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that Trevor has gone on to be so successful in his chosen field, communication. Today, he is the Executive Director of the National Communication

Association (NCA), an organization dedicated to advancing the academic discipline of Communication. Founded in 1914, the group boasts a storied history and a near perfect-record of holding successful annual conventions (the sole exception being the convention of 1918, cancelled on account of WWI). Trevor, fascinated by history and with a steel-trap memory for detail, relishes educating friends and coworkers on the group's century-plus of growth. "Fair warning," he jokes, "I am simultaneously both admired and ridiculed for my fascination with the history of NCA!"



It is this fascination that leads Trevor to share that NCA was founded on an unseasonably warm day in November, at the Ambassador Hotel in Chicago, Illinois. The National Council of Teachers of English convention had been going on all week, and the division of members who taught public speaking broke off to form a new association. At the first meeting, 124 teachers attended. At the second, a mere 17 showed to actually form

the charter and found the new group, then called the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. Why the drop off in attendance? "I think it's because they were all out enjoying the 69 degree weather in November in Chicago," laughs Trevor.

He goes on to discuss the various peaks and valleys of NCA's history, from several name changes, to membership spikes and drop-offs. After WWII, the group grew exponentially, as the public began to recognize the deep connections between communication and political change. "A lot of people were looking at Europe saying 'how did this happen?'," explains Trevor, "asking, 'what were the persuasive dynamics at play here?' Social scientists, psychologists, and sociologists stepped in and decided they needed to be paying attention to communication. That expanded pretty significantly the role and the influence of

communication on college campuses.”

Today, the group’s membership has risen from a mere 17 to over 6500 and is, in fact, the largest organization of its kind. Along with hosting an annual conference, NCA publishes 11 academic journals. All members can submit research to the journals, and a record of successful publication can mean promotion and tenure. But Trevor is also keen to stress the intangible benefits of membership in NCA. “I want people to join NCA because it’s fundamental to their professional lives and it’s a community they believe in,” affirms Trevor, “I want them to join, hopefully not out of obligation, but out of desire, because their life is made better because they’re part of this community.”

Trevor himself has been a member since all the way back in 1984, when, as an undergraduate at Ripon College in Wisconsin, he attended his first NCA Annual Conference at the invitation of a professor who saw his potential in the field. Professionally, he has been employed by NCA since 2012, when he took leave from his tenured position at University of Maryland to accept the role of Director of Academic and Professional Affairs. Since September of 2016, Trevor moved into the role of Interim Executive Director twice before the Executive Committee asked him to stay on in the position permanently in February 2018. Today, he wants to focus on membership retention, membership recruitment, and ensuring that members understand the benefits of NCA both tangible and not. “We have folks who study communication aesthetically, social scientifically, humanistically, and more,” explains Trevor, “we strive to serve our members and provide them with resources that they can use to advance their professional goals, as well as, to some degree, their personal lives. And we seek to bring to fruition our commitment to diversity and inclusion, creating an academic association that truly reflects the broad diversity of the universe of people who study and think about communication.”

Trevor has been studying communication for decades, and his fascination with the subject is only pre-dated by his interest in politics, a topic he came to enjoy during his childhood in San Francisco, California. Although Trevor was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, his parents relocated to San Francisco when he was 5, and most of his first memories take place around the Bay Area. His

young parents, who had him at the tender ages of 19 and 20, frequently moved the little family, and he remembers homes in Marin County, Palo Alto, and in the heart of the city of San Francisco. He rarely spent more than two years in the same school, and this led to a high turnover of childhood friendships- but a broad diversity of relationships he grew to appreciate.

The Bay Area was the perfect place to be exposed to people from all backgrounds. Young Trevor befriended a half-Irish, half-Basque boy named Kevin, spent time with a Filipino family, and was often brought along to Catholic masses by his very religious Italian babysitter. At school, Trevor was constantly being forced to make friends all over again, but the instability allowed him to cultivate a strong independent streak. His parents often left him to his own devices, compelling him to learn how to make his own way. “It was a different time,” nods Trevor, “we had no boundaries, almost at all. We’d run around the neighborhood and explore undeveloped areas, trees and creeks and such. We played a lot of games. And I became studious, from a young age I always did well in school.”

Trevor’s parents, young as they were, never pressured him much about grades or his future. Both ended up getting college degrees, but that was after Trevor had grown up and graduated from college himself. During Trevor’s youth, his mother worked a government job, but she didn’t settle into a permanent career track, working in senior living, until much later. She also wrestled with personal issues and health problems. His father, meanwhile, was constantly changing careers as quickly as he mastered his field. He was smart and capable, but easily grew bored. “He’s generally a tinkerer,” laughs Trevor, “That’s how I think of him, he doesn’t have a career per se, but he’s had a number of jobs, and he’s always very, very good at them. He was an auto mechanic, a banker, he owned his own auto repair shop, and then he actually ended up working as a machine technician for British Petroleum on the North Slope of Alaska for years. He’s had so many different careers and hobbies that it’s a little dizzying!”

In school, Trevor quickly discovered an affinity for politics and, in particular, for the Presidency. He was in fifth grade when a social studies teacher assigned a project about the U.S. Presidents, and Trevor went above and beyond,

researching them all. "I ended up with this fifth grader's encyclopedia of the Presidency," laughs Trevor, "I think that started my fascination with the American Presidency." That fascination has driven much of Trevor's professional work and personal studies, and today he holds particular interest in our second President, John Adams. A bust of Adams given to him by his wife and children is a prized possession of Trevor's.

Soon after that fateful social studies project, Trevor's parents decided to divorce, a mutual decision for which Trevor commends them. "I knew it was coming," Trevor remembers, "but they did everything right with the divorce. There was never any sense that anything was my fault. There was never a sense that they lost their regard for each other, there was no badmouthing. It wasn't a nasty divorce; it was a pretty easy one." Four years later, Trevor and his mother returned to New Mexico to be closer to both sets of grandparents, all of whom were great caretakers of and influences on young Trevor. In fact, Trevor shares that another of his most prized possessions is a gravy boat made by his grandmother, because it reminds him of their close relationship. "My grandparents were really fundamental, I spent a lot of time with them," reminisces Trevor, "both of my grandmothers were great cooks, and I remember very clearly the meals in their houses. My grandparents were very involved in my upbringing by sharing a lot of history and telling me family stories and rituals."

At high school in New Mexico, Trevor's success on the Speech and Debate team was just one of his extra-curricular activities. He also was elected to the Student Council, and during his senior year participated in the Drama Club's production of *Inherit the Wind* as the Judge. He had worked his first job back in Marin County, at the local library, and now he took his second at a nearby Steak and Ale as a busboy. He spent most of his income travelling around the state for Speech and Debate events.

Trevor's talent for the subject, plus his independent spirit, led him to apply for a Speech and Debate scholarship at Ripon College, all the way up in Ripon, Wisconsin. He easily landed it, and went on to greatly enjoy his time there as a double major in Politics & Government and Communication. Trevor travelled around the state earning what were called "legs" at regional speech and debate tournaments, hoping to earn enough

"legs" to attend the national tournament. Although he had mostly been competing in Wisconsin, he found out about a contest at the University of New Mexico, and convinced his coach to let him enter. The tournament was taking place right after the winter break, and Trevor would be home anyway.

He entered five different speech events—persuasion speaking, after-dinner speaking, extemporaneous speaking, impromptu speaking, and informative speaking. He won the top prize in four out five events, and placed second in the fifth. This showing would prove fateful in more ways than one. Trevor soon received a call from the school, asking him to enroll in the Master's program at the University of New Mexico (UNM) and to coach the speech team. He agreed. Upon his arrival in the fall of 1986, he found himself sharing an office with a new coworker. The woman, Shawn, was a second-year graduate student who also happened to have been a judge at his after-dinner speaking event and the sole judge he failed to impress. "One judge gave me a 99, one judge gave 100, and she," laughs Trevor, "she gave me an 82! She thought I was cocky, and arrogant, and obnoxious. But over time she decided I wasn't so bad, and well, we ended up getting married!"

Trevor proposed at the end of his first year at UNM, just as Shawn was planning to head off to Indiana University to pursue her doctorate. Reluctant to spend a year in a long-distance relationship, Trevor and Shawn decided to get married and stay in New Mexico for one more year. At the end of the year, the two went off to Indiana together, where they both began their PhDs at the school. After graduation, Shawn took a position at Monmouth College in Illinois, while Trevor started at nearby St. Ambrose University in Iowa. For six years, the two taught comfortably there, until a major life decision pushed them to move on.

The couple adopted a baby, Sam, from the Philippines, and were eager to raise him in a more diverse area. This desire was reinforced when a racist landlord demanded that the young family move rather than allow a non-white child to live on the property. "We ended up finding a lawyer," recounts Trevor soberly, "it's a violation of the law, of course. State law, federal law, every law. You can't evict people on the basis of the race of their adopted child." Still, the incident left a bad taste in the couple's mouths, and they redoubled

their efforts to relocate.

Soon after, Shawn was offered a position at the University of Maryland. Although she'd have to give up her tenure, and although Trevor hadn't yet found a job, he encouraged her to jump at the opportunity. The three relocated to the DC area in 1998, and Trevor began job hunting. He found a position advertised in the *Washington Post* for a senior writer at a progressive political consulting firm. He wrote a letter of interest, was brought in to interview, and landed the gig. Curious about how he, an academic, had bested some of the more politically experienced candidates, Trevor asked the firm why they'd selected him. "They told me I knew more about political communication than anybody they talked to," recalls Trevor, "And this was Comm 101, basic stuff!"

Suddenly Trevor found himself thrust into the beating heart of DC, helping utilize his communication skills to elect Democratic candidates. Although the party had feared losing seats that year over the impeachment scandal, they actually ended up picking up five seats and four of them had been clients of Trevor's firm.

A year later, Trevor returned to academia with a Visiting Assistant Professorship at the University of Maryland. Within two years, he received a tenure track appointment. In 2005, he was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure, and in 2010, he became a full Professor. In 2012, he took leave from the school to move over to NCA.

Throughout his career, Trevor has cultivated a special professional relationship with his wife. With so many common interests, Trevor and Shawn have actually collaborated on several research and writing projects, including a book about the television show *The West Wing* and how that show conceptualizes the role and duties of the Presidency. "She's been very important to my work," stresses Trevor, "it's a very symbiotic sort of thing. It's a strange relationship in that it's both personal and professional, and we're always

negotiating that, but we really work well together." For years, the two even alternated attending NCA's annual conferences with one parent staying home with Sam and their second adopted son, Eli.

When asked about his leadership style, Trevor reflects that he's seldom considered himself to be a leader. "In terms of my management style," he corrects, humbly, "I like to think that I'm collaborative, that I bring out in people their own capacities, their best abilities, and their own voice."

And to young people embarking on their professional careers, he advises a moral compass, and care for others. "Character is destiny," he states, "I've come to believe that that really makes a difference. I think of it in terms of what, in history, you'd refer to as 'civic virtue'. You have to sublimate your individual goals and needs for the broader good. For many people, that means their community, or their family. But that sense of devotion to something larger than yourself is really important." For Trevor, finding his voice has meant sharing his vision for a better world and of course, communicating it effectively.

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– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).