

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO BECOMING A COMMUNICATOR

by Dennis L. Peterson

Early in my career as a writer, I jumped at the opportunity to write an article based on an interview. I thought I had found the perfect angle. A young mother of two suffered a debilitating degenerative disease. But by combining her poetic abilities with a friend's artistic bent, she founded a unique greeting card company to encourage women who had either been diagnosed as infertile or suffered a miscarriage.

The young lady agreed to let me interview her late one afternoon. At the time, I paid bills by working at a dusty manufacturing facility. Knowing the importance of professional appearance and not having time to go home to clean up before the interview, I stayed as clean as I could that day. I took off a little early, cleaned up in the men's room, and changed into business casual clothes.

Not a hair was out of place. No wood dust fogged my glasses. I even splashed on expensive cologne. Then, as an afterthought, I popped a particularly potent brand of gum into my mouth to freshen my breath.

Arriving at her house, I took quick inventory of my essential tools: notepad, pens, tape recorder, blank tapes, camera, and film. With both trepidation and confidence, I strode to her door and rang the bell.

The interviewee answered. Her dark, shoulder-length hair framed a bright face and ready smile. The only sign of disability was a cane. Soft-spoken and calm, she invited me in, waved me to a couch, and sat in a wheelchair angled opposite the couch.

We chatted while I removed my notepad and pens and set up the tape recorder. Seeing my camera, she suggested that I take photos early in the interview. She explained that she tired easily and wanted to look refreshed in any pictures I took. I agreed and continued small talk as I bent to retrieve my camera.

Then it happened. The gum dropped from my mouth to the floor; bounced once; and landed on my interviewee's toe, which was innocently exposed in her open-toed shoe. It stuck there.

As soon as the gum bounced, I lunged for it, then paused briefly when I saw its landing spot. Without interrupting the flow of our conversation, she elevated her foot slightly and extended it toward me. I obligingly removed the saliva-covered glob; and, red-faced, apologized profusely.

“No problem,” she said and immediately began suggesting poses.

I gained a vital lesson that day: no matter how well prepared, well-dressed, or well-coiffed one might be, never go into an interview chewing gum!

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