

## MIRACLES COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES -- AND HAPPEN TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN THEM

by Terri Branson

It's every coach's nightmare: a natural disaster that makes the trip home impossible. In my case, it was snow. We had traveled to the two-day tournament on Friday afternoon in pouring rain. We awoke on Saturday morning to a thin layer of ice that covered everything. Certain that warming temperatures and salt would clear the way by Saturday afternoon, we did what any serious forensic team would do--we went to rounds and ignored the problem. Some of us ignored it better than others.

I don't judge at tournaments anymore; I hide. While doing just that and reading through scripts in the library, I glanced up and saw a friend of mine, his mouth hanging open and his finger pointing at the window behind my head. When I looked behind me, I beheld huge, beautiful, innocent looking white flakes floating gently to earth. My first thought, "Oh, how beautiful!" was interrupted by Tommy's horrified exclamation: "Children! We're gonna die" I guess we wouldn't be forensic coaches if we weren't--uh--dramatic.

Tommy, a fellow coach and friend of mine, had traveled a long way from the eastern mountains of our state, a region known for impassable roads in winter. I tried to calm him, as did his assistant coach, a delightful woman named Kathy. We both assured him that snow was a good sign because it meant that the temperature had risen and that the salt would work now, unlike in the earlier icy conditions. He refused to be consoled.

Shortly after we had convinced Tommy to at least stop screaming, Steve, a coach from another school and a former student of mine, entered the library. "Children!" he yelled, in his best imitation of our friend Tommy. "We're gonna die!" Oh, Lord, I thought, here we go again... Steve intensely dislikes driving anything larger than his compact car, so I approached him with

what foolishly imagined to be a soothing thought: "It's okay. You don't have to drive." I honestly don't think he even heard me. No assurance would do until he felt he had released his fear. ( I later found out his reasoning. With his fear vented, he was able to calmly walk out and tell his team that no decision had been made about traveling but that everything would be okay. His students immediately stopped worrying and went back to business as usual.)

A little while later, I gave up my hiding place to join the general confusion in the hospitality room. I found one of the coaches pacing and wide-eyed. She saw me and came to stand beside me. "I'm going to be hysterical," she announced. "I think you're going to have to slap me." Laughing, I assured her that I had some experience in that area; I had already "slapped" Tommy and Steve earlier. We walked into the hallway where Tommy and Steve were talking, no longer screaming but looking tense and edgy. Suddenly, Jennifer let out a wail, drew a breath, let out another wail, and began to draw another breath when--I grabbed her, wondering what Tommy and Steve thought was so darn funny.

Looking back, I now see that part of the humor came from the fact that I was the calm one, the one in complete control. I, known as the Pickle Lady at that particular tournament because I eat BOWLS of the local deli pickles every year, could not possibly be the one in control. My antics in times of stress (Can I help it if I'm always stressed?) have entertained the central and eastern half of the state for years. Seeing me mother the very people who had long been looking out for me provided the comic relief the situation seemed to demand. I was funny even when I wasn't funny! I was determined to go home; after having slept the night before on a rollaway with a mattress that nearly touched the floor--not everywhere, mind you, just halfway between my head and my feet--I

wanted nothing more than to sleep in my own bed. We had run into some other problems, too. Our bus driver, a good sport from beginning to end, had backed into a van behind the bus the night before, breaking its headlight. Fortunately, it was a parent of one of our students. The next morning, in another scene from the nightmare, he had gallantly offered to help a different parent loosen her wiper from the frozen windshield of her car; the wiper came off in his hand. I can, even now, hardly express just how much I wanted to go home before anything else happened. Knowing that I had no money and no way to pay for rooms (if any were vacant) made me even more determined to leave. It wasn't a good idea, but--I really wanted to go home.

As the day progressed, phone calls kept the wires humming to hometowns as we sought information about weather conditions. Forty-five miles south of our location, temperatures were well above freezing, and rain replaced the snow. The problem, it turned out, would be getting past those fifty-five miles. At last, after Tommy threatened to lie down in front of the bus if I tried to leave, the decision was made. We were stuck. Period.

I was talking on the phone to the transportation director when I began to realize that all the things we say to our kids about forensics being more than winning were going to be lived out in front in them. "Do you have any money?" he asked. "No."

"What are you going to do?" He sounded concerned and startled at my calm. (A few years earlier, I had been encouraged to take bus driver's training in order to save money for the team. Mr. Smith was the one who had been honest enough to tell my principal that I should NOT be driving busloads of kids anywhere.)

"Well," I said, knowing that what I was about to say is the true meaning of the entire forensics ex-

perience, "being in speech is like being a part of a large family. We'll be taken care of."

And so we were.

Kathy calmly made reservations for ten rooms for three schools to share. Their team would pay, and we would pay them back the next week. Not counting the students whose parents had come to judge and were stranded also, 66 people needed housing. We would stuff people wherever necessary, we decided, but at least we wouldn't be out in the snow.

Other schools were in the same predicament (although most of them had money with them), and somehow, they found extra room if we needed to stuff some people in with their students. (One of my students, wandering the halls looking for breathing space, was offered a place to sleep in a room occupied by ten guys he had never seen before. They just wanted to be sure he had a place to go.) Miraculously, the bus drivers for mine, Tommy's, and Steve's schools got a separate room--free. We all had a place to sleep. A miracle.

Tommy, Steve, and I gathered in the lobby to try to decide where to put all the kids. Another coach came to tell us that the hotel had agreed to open a conference room so that the teams could have a central gathering place. If our kids didn't have enough money to eat, they could join their teams and eat the pizza they were ordering; they were also welcome to go with the group to the movie (within shivering waking distance). "Snowball fight--nine o'clock!" a student announced while running past.

We were lucky to be housed in a central location close to a variety of restaurants. No transportation would be necessary. We could choose what we wanted to eat and walk to get it. They weren't fast food places, either. How would people pay? Most of them had brought only money enough to last through lunch of that day. I've often heard that disaster brings out the very best and the very worst in people. Our students showed great generosity, their best, and all of them (as far as I could tell) were fed and full by bedtime. Did I say BEDTIME?? When we went to check on people around the time of curfew (surely a better word choice than "bedtime"), we could hardly tell who belonged to whom. The same kids who had been appalled earlier in the day that some

students from another school might ride our bus home were enmeshed in the rooms of most of the schools who had attended the tournament. They were watching movies, playing cards, and just talking. We had a devil of a time chasing them out of each other's rooms and back into the rooms they were sharing with people from "home."

We coaches were wild. Steve and Scott, my student assistant coach, carefully planned a snowball attack on Tommy, who was holding the window in a position to slam it shut and shield himself after he taunted the folks outside from the warmth of his room. Steve faked a throw, Tommy dodged, and Scott plastered him before Tommy even thought about that window. Tommy fell back into the room, soaking wet and laughing like a kid himself.

Later, Steve, incoherent at best when he is sleepy, became a walking nonsense man. He fell over on the bed in the middle of kids and critique sheets and began mumbling hilarious nonsequiturs. Kathy was answering the door and the phone and generally mothering all the teenagers, taking care of their problems and (truth be told) the coaches' problems, too. It was Kathy who paid for my dinner, urging me to save my money in case one of my kids needed it on the way home.

After much rushing around trying to insure SOME sense of order, we finally slept. Morning came, and a hotel of sleepyheads awoke and stumbled down to the lobby where a Continental breakfast was spread before us--FREE and there for our students to help themselves. Another miracle, indeed.

The bus drivers had agreed that we should travel in a caravan in case we ran into bad weather on our way home, or as Steve put it, "So we can at least all die together." Our next challenge was getting the kids on the buses; I had no idea of the impact of the night before. I had forgotten how sharing even brief times in confined spaces (church lock-ins, summer camps, bus trips for band and ballgames) can bring people together. For goodness' sake, they were hugging, holding hands, taking pictures...

I realized that the rest of the season would be different. Not every team in the state had been at that particular competition, of course, and perhaps those students wouldn't

notice the difference at the tournaments that would follow this one. The atmosphere would be different, just the same. We coach to teach students healthy competition, to be the best at their talents, and to learn lessons about life: Be a gracious winner and a gracious loser. Use this opportunity to make new friends. Speech is not just about winning; it's about finding out about yourself. Sometimes they believe us; sometimes they only learn how to win trophies. That morning, as the laughter echoed across the white, frozen ground, I knew that at the next tournament the desire to win could not be diminished, but I also knew that it would no longer be the single, driving force behind students dragging themselves out of bed before daylight on Saturday mornings. We arrived home safely and stopped at a convenience market so that students could make arrangements for rides home from school. The manager, upon finding out about our experience, allowed the students to get free doughnuts. I was amazed, once again, at the kindness of humanity.

We are left now with special memories and private jokes that will be long remembered and make class reunions particularly poignant. We are known at the bus garage; the fear on the face of the transportation director can be seen by one and all when we approach with a bus request. Students who never heard of the team before suddenly want to know how to join. "It sounds like such fun!" They say. Too late, I think. That special nightmare was meant only for those of us who had the courage to dream before snowball fights and new romances born on a snowy night.

The nightmare is over. I wouldn't want to go through it again. I will, however, consider it as one of the most confirming events of my life, an event that prones:

Miracles come in all shape and sizes--to those who believe in them. (*Terri Branson teaches at Jessamine County High School (KY)*)