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MILLION

TONI MEREDITH SHINES AS A SPEAKER'S ASSISTANT

BY JERI MAE ROWLEY, MS HR

Long before the era of virtual assistants, off-shoring and outsourcing, Toni Meredith was there for her speaker with hands-on, personalized, professional support. She continues to be there now, with the same zest she has brought to the position for 34 years. Her employer, an award-winning speaker with a career spanning 49 years, Jeanne Robertson, CSP, CPAE, past NSA National President and Cavett recipient, says, "There's no doubt about it. Toni's one in a million!"

The search is still on for a professional speaker admin with a longer track record than Toni. Jeanne describes an NSA event where speaker staff lined up based on the number of years serving their speaker: "Toni had to go out in the hall!"

And it's hard to imagine anyone loving her job as much as Toni does. "It's always been fun. Never boring. Every day is different," she says. "You never know what will happen. Some requests are kind of strange."

What kind of strange requests?

"The Mayflower Madam called inquiring about getting into speaking," she recalls, chuckling. Then, there was the elderly lady who said she had stepped on her copy of Jeanne's CD. "Will you replace it for free?" she asked. (Of course, Toni complied.)

A Duo with a Destiny

Toni and Jeanne both attended Auburn University in the early 1960s. Toni says she knew who Jeanne was because "she was so tall and really active in student government. She was also Miss North Carolina, so everyone knew her."

During the mid-1970s, Jeanne and Toni both moved to Burlington, N.C., with their young families. They had many mutual friends and belonged to the same organizations.

"Toni was an active community volunteer," Jeanne says. "Everyone knew her." In 1979, after 16 years as a solopreneur speaker, Jeanne and her husband, Jerry, agreed her business needed administrative help. Jeanne asked Toni if she'd like the job.

"Not really," Toni replied.



The Meredith and Henry Families



Toni and Tom Meredith with grandchildren



Jeanne Robertson, CSP, CPAE, dedicated a book, *Mayberry Humor Across the USA*, to Toni Meredith.

Toni and Jeanne's *Highlights & High Jinks*

At Toni's first NSA convention, Jeanne explained to her that she was not invited to Og and Betty Mandino's private party for the Board, but when it was time to go, Toni was dressed and waiting to depart. Talk about awkward. Jeanne again explained to Toni that she had not been invited. Wrong. Toni had spent the day by the pool next to "a nice lady" who had invited her. When they arrived, Betty Mandino's voice rang out, "Toni, you're here!" Toni's over-the-shoulder glance at Jeanne was priceless.

Jeanne has occasional "Employee Awards Banquets." These are big deals with invitations going to about 40 of Toni's friends. Jeanne announces each category, such as "Employee of the Year," opens the envelope, reads the winner and Toni parades forward to thunderous applause. She wins every award. One year she even won the Employee Safety Award for calling the fire department when she discovered the Robertson's house was on fire.

When Jeanne was NSA President, Toni helped organize 19 receptions in the Presidential Suite, and repeatedly traipsed with Jeanne's husband, Jerry, to grocery stores all over town for the food. "Toni did mounds of extra paperwork and telephoning that year, but even today, what she talks about the most is 'cleaning up after those parties,'" Jeanne says. "I'm putting it nicely."

Toni's daughter, Lesley, and Past NSA President Robert Henry's son, Patrick Henry, attended the NSA Youth Program. Later, they became NSA's

first Youth Program Marriage. They are now parents of three: Jack, Robert and a daughter named Meredith. To this day, Jeanne says, "Should have named her 'Jeanne.' Big mistake."

As Jeanne delivered the opening keynote at an NSA Convention, she spoke about seeing the humor in stressful situations. Toni was in the front row when someone passed out in the audience. In the ensuing lull, Toni actually mouthed to Jeanne on stage, "Did you plan this?"

For Toni's 20th anniversary, the Merediths and Robertsons went to Hawaii for a business retreat to plan how to keep Jeanne busy for the next 20 years. They planned so well that they haven't had time during the last 14 years for another retreat, a point Toni enjoys mentioning. Repeatedly.

Jeanne has produced seven full-length CDs/DVDs since 1998. Toni has coordinated filling audiences for the tapings, distributing thousands of tickets, taking all the orders and shipping all product sales. She says if there is another tape, it will be named "Last Tape."

Toni accompanied the Robertsons when Jeanne spoke at the White House. Jeanne is 6'4" in heels. Standing all of 5-feet tall, Toni told everyone she was the bodyguard.

Jeanne dedicated one of her books, *Mayberry Humor Across the USA*, this way: *To Toni Meredith, who has run my office since 1979 with the enthusiasm of Barney Fife and the "smarts" of Andy Taylor. To paraphrase Sheriff Taylor's words about his deputy, "Toni doesn't just work for me. We're pretty close friends."*

Toni's job interview took place in the laundry room that served as Jeanne's office. Toni said she'd take the job, but she would never "work from an office outside my own home, work set hours or miss my children's school programs, ball games or recitals.

"And," she continued, "I usually play tennis once a week and bridge twice." It sounded perfect to Jeanne, who didn't want someone around all the time when she was home. Agreeing to all these terms, Jeanne hired Toni as her first-ever and only-ever staff person.

"I've never had to account for my time to Jeanne," Toni explains. "I keep the business running so Jeanne can be creative and is free to enjoy her time at home when she isn't traveling."

Jeanne describes the working relationship this way: "I give Toni the work, and it's off my list—I never think about it again."

Toni's original terms of employment still stand. "Now it's her grandkids playing in ball games she won't ever miss," Jeanne says.

Welcome to Mayberry

Over the decades, Toni has booked Jeanne for more than 4,000 speeches. The duo has established a way of doing business that's *neighborly*.

"We want customers to feel like they are visiting the *Andy Griffith Show*," Toni says. "We truly try to run the business by the Golden Rule." Every process is focused on serving customers and is true to Jeanne's lessons in finding the "Flat Out Funny" in everyday life.

"We don't have call waiting," Toni explains. "If the phone is busy, they call back. I'm not always here. If I'm out of the office, they get the answering machine with a really funny message from Jeanne. People call back just to listen to Jeanne. I've answered the phone and been told to 'please hang up.' ... They just want to listen to her message again and again."

Many of Jeanne's fans are seniors and they are less likely to use their credit card for an online purchase, so many product orders still come by phone. Because Toni is mentioned in Jeanne's videos and radio programs so often, when they hear her say, "Toni speaking," they ask, "Is this really you?"

Toni says she is committed to getting back to callers within an hour. "That iPad

“No one else can add just the right personal touch to Grandma's 'Happy 90th Birthday MeMaw' note.”

and my wireless keyboard are the greatest inventions ever!" She can take her iPad to a grandchild's ball game and stay in touch with the office.

"We've never had a long, written contract for clients," Toni shares. "The letter of confirmation I use now is the same one I created on a typewriter. I still send them out by snail mail. We like how it looks on Jeanne's stationery with her tall microphone." Jeanne's engagements are booked so far in advance that they're never in a huge rush. Clients can fax, mail or email the confirmation back.

Jeanne's travel checklist is also the same as it's always been, with Toni sending it out a few weeks prior to a speech. "We don't shun technology, but only use it if it helps us do things better," she explains.

Mayberry RFD Goes Cyber

At their 1999 "business retreat," held on a Hawaiian beach, Jeanne and Toni couldn't anticipate the impact of the Internet on professional speakers. Technology has taken Jeanne's speaking business to vast new audiences. Through her popular YouTube Channel (with more than 15 million views), iTunes™ and SiriusXM Satellite radio, Jeanne's product sales have tripled, and requests for speaking engagements have increased by five times. There are also "superfans" who host blogs and tweet about Jeanne.

These powerful online venues have not only increased the demand for Jeanne's programs and products; they also have led to new adventures for Toni. Jeanne is now being booked for one-woman performances at 1,000- to 2,000-seat theaters across the country.

"There are a lot more details involved in ticketed events," Toni says. "It's a new ball game, but we like it." Toni uses

a paper calendar to track travel details and deadlines. "I just printed out calendars for 2014!! And I thought to myself, 'When am I ever going to stop printing calendars?'"

"We don't have a postage meter. I go to our local post office every day. They know me," she adds. "We don't contract out the fulfillment of CD and DVD orders to an outside source. No one else can add just the right personal touch to Grandma's 'Happy 90th Birthday MeMaw' note."

But giving Mayberry service to a growing fan base can be a daunting task. "Last year, at Christmas, we had four to five carloads a day of product to ship," Toni says.

Mrs. Robertson's Neighborhood

"Years ago, our kids always worked for us after school and during the summer," Toni recalls. Now many office and technology tasks are contracted out to others. But it's clear that Toni's version of "off-shoring" is working with someone from the next county. And she knows who to call if she needs help in a hurry.

"You don't have to know how to do everything," Toni says. "There are people out there who have the expertise." Toni finds them in her own back yard.

Local travel agents have proven invaluable. The website is handled locally as is

reproduction of products. Jeanne's daughter-in-law, Dayna, helps with the product marketing. Norma Rose, Jeanne's "bestest friend," assists Toni by preparing packages to ship. And Toni's son-in-law, Patrick Henry, is great with technology.

And of course, Jeanne's husband, Jerry, does whatever he's told.

All in the NSA Family

Toni and Jeanne have a joyful respect for each other. They've shared so much of each other's lives. They celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas together. Jeanne and Lesley (Toni's daughter) will be hosting Toni and husband Tom's 50th wedding anniversary in August, right after the National Convention in Indianapolis.

"I've attended every NSA convention since 1981 with Jeanne. Our children participated in the NSA Youth Program, and now our grandsons do," Toni says. "The Indy convention will be particularly exciting for us with Patrick serving as Convention Chair and Jeanne delivering the opening keynote. Every time I go I learn. People are so willing to share. NSA people are warm, fun and friendly. It's a really fine organization."

Today, there are more than 4.1 million secretaries and administrative assistants working in the United States, and 8.9 million people working in various administrative support roles. Toni Meredith is better than one in a million. She is the real thing.



About the time Jeanne hired Toni, Jeri Mae Rowley's father—an Idaho saddle-maker—was sending his college-bound daughter off into

the world. Dad's final words, as he shut the car door, were: "Always be nice to the secretaries. They are the most important people in any organization. You treat them with respect." Rowley hopes she gets to introduce Dad to Toni someday. Learn more about speaker and trainer Jeri Mae Rowley at www.jerimaerowley.com.