



## **My Journey to Voiceover**

### **Todd Williams Voice Actor/Voiceover Artist**

While pursuing a career in voiceover (or is it voice over, or voice-over – I never know) is relatively new for me, it's been a long time coming. However if you had known me in elementary school you might not think so.

When I was little, I had a pretty severe problem with stuttering. In school it caused me to have low self-esteem as classmates and older kids like to make jokes at my expense. It was as if my brain was providing the words faster than my mouth could express them. But with the help of a speech therapist, Mrs. Smith, I was able to work through it. I spent a few hours a week with her, learning to break paragraphs, sentences, phrases and words into more manageable chunks. I learned to pace myself with breathing, taking my time, and not letting the words get trapped between my brain and lips.



By the time I reached 5th grade my stuttering was less of an issue as my self-esteem improved, I became more confident, and I began to grow physically. At the end of that year I was the tallest boy in the class, I was a straight A student and I was one of the starting players on the basketball team. I had my first experience speaking in front of a crowd when I performed in a skit as part of a school talent show. I did an imitation of comedian Tim Conway's old man character from the Carol Burnett show. Just a year before that would have been unthinkable!

I only stuttered at times of extreme excitement or anxiety, like a close basketball game, or when called to the blackboard for math problems in class. But even then, when I felt the words piling up, I heard Mrs. Smith's kind, reassuring voice reminding me to breathe, and take my time.

In Jr. High and High School, success in basketball and academics improved things for me. My confidence in speaking continued to grow. I volunteered for opportunities to narrate classroom skits, read aloud, and be the 'announcer' for various activities. In high school, I worked behind the scenes in musicals, always wishing that I had auditioned for a part. I was the on-field announcer for the marching band, and narrated several small productions. A friend and I wrote and produced a slide show adaptation of a short story from our literature textbook using early superhero action figures. We provided the voice performances, and added theme music and sound effects. It played to rave reviews in classes throughout the school, and we received an A+ for our work. I finished high school in 1982, third in my class



academically and with several academic awards and varsity letters in basketball, track and cross country.

College was challenging, working part time and living off campus didn't help my social life, which looking back was a good thing, since I didn't fall into the drinking and drugs that was a big part the lives of many of my friends from youth. But I also didn't have much time for extra-curricular activities that might have provided an opportunity to use my voice. But I was preparing for the world of work in the field of Information Technology.



Four years passed, and in June of 1986 I graduated from the University of Tennessee – Martin with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science. In July of 1986 I moved to Texas to work for GTE Directories - my first real job. Living on my own so far from home was hard, but six months later I married my high school sweetheart, and things got better. In my job at GTE and later at Bell Helicopter I worked in telephone technical support. I

constantly was told I had a great voice - if I only knew what to do with it.

In December of 1989 we moved back to our native Southern Illinois to be closer to family. I continued to work in technology, but for much smaller companies, where the support I provided was more face to face. While working for a health care company, I began conducting workshops for our salesforce on various software applications. I enjoyed being in front of people again, and relished each opportunity.

Six years later I took a job that required even more of my presentation skills with the State of Illinois. I traveled across Illinois assisting schools in technology projects, with the goal of connecting them all to the Internet. I spoke to teachers, administrators, school boards, city and county officials. I was a featured speaker at open houses, technology conferences and job fairs. My confidence as a speaker continued to grow.

In my personal life, I was asked to serve as lay leader of my church, filling the pulpit any time the pastor was away. I became a certified lay speaker in the United Methodist Church, spoke at weekend retreats a few times a year and even considered pursuing ordination at one point.



I was also asked by a friend who had purchased a local radio station if I would help him broadcast local high school basketball games. I would keep stats and offer “color”

commentary. It was a good fit...having played basketball throughout school, and I had recently started coaching a Jr. High boys' team. It was good to be involved again with a sport I had always loved, hang out with a good friend, and again use my voice. We wrote and produced our own promos for the season and the games. I even read some live commercials for game sponsors. I wasn't paid, but it was enjoyable, and it continued to build my confidence as a speaker. I worked for the radio station for 4 years (I coached for 15), and I still remember that time with great fondness.

In 2002, I took a job that was my greatest professional challenge, as Director of Technology for Marion Unit 2 Schools. Marion is the largest school district in the area with an enrollment of 4000 students, and a staff of over 300. Before I took the position, the district had a technology staff of 1. There was a backlog of over 400 reported technology issues. I was allowed to hire 3 additional technicians, and within 6 months we had that whittled down to less than 50.

It was at this job that I was able to gather experience with digital recording equipment and software, audio/video editing, and copywriting. I scripted and recorded all the telephone announcements (broadcast to faculty, staff and students); recorded, produced and live-streamed school board meetings; created and produced several screencast/video training modules for faculty; and wrote, recorded, and produced a technology podcast with a district administrator. The job was demanding, sometimes exasperating, but always interesting and I would have gladly worked there for the rest of my life.

One of the unfortunate factors of public education is that public schools are run by a board of education, made up of people elected every few years who, though usually well intentioned, may know very little about how to operate a school district. For the first 9 years of my time at Marion, the school board was largely in favor of the operation of the district, and particularly pleased with the turnaround in district technology support. But in the 2012 election the tides turned, four favorable incumbents were replaced by four new members with personal and political agendas. These agendas all seemed to include doing everything possible to reverse all that had been accomplished over the previous 9 years (the tenure of the district superintendent that had hired me). So in Dec 2012 it was announced that huge budget cuts were on the horizon, including one to my department. On May 15, 2012 I was informed that my position had been eliminated, and I could go home.

After several months of speculating as to who, what and when would be affected, it was actually a relief for it to be over. I went home that day with an interesting combination of emotions; relief, fear, sadness, anger, bitterness, uncertainty, confusion, etc. Essentially I look back on that time as if I was going through a grieving process. Still to this day, I occasionally slip back into that mindset – somewhere I struggle not to remain.



During that time of uncertainty, for the first time since I entered college, I began to think about the profession I wanted to pursue. I thought, “What if I can’t find a job working in IT?” and “What do I enjoy that perhaps I could make a living doing?” I thought back to my days as a narrator in school, lay speaker at church, technology speaker, color commentator and podcaster. I remembered how much I enjoyed all those experiences. At this point I did not have awareness that voiceover was even a viable career unless you lived in LA or New York.

While unemployed I became a book buying fiend – technology (skill building), careers (resumes, etc.), Christianity (for encouragement) and comics/graphic novels (for entertainment). One day while shopping in my local Barnes and Noble, I saw a book called “Voice-Over Voice Actor: What It's Like Behind the Mic” by Yuri Lowenthal and Tara Platt. While skimming through the book in the store, I read that while much of the voiceover work is in LA and New York (the authors both work primarily in animation) that smaller markets like Nashville and St. Louis are also a source of work. I live two hours from St. Louis and three from Nashville. Though the

book really didn't get into the possibility of working from my home in Southern Illinois, it at least made it sound like a possibility.

From that point in the spring and summer of 2012, I have read dozens of books, endless blogs and articles, taken numerous courses (both in person and over the Internet) with some of the biggest names in voice over, many times having the opportunity to perform for and be critiqued by them. I sound-treated my home office, and successfully completed a crowd-funding campaign to raise enough capital to get started.



I've trained with well-respected Nashville voice coach and producer, Joe Loesch, who produced my commercial demo in October. I've since been working on a website, and other marketing material to get the ball rolling. Now with the foundation in place, my goal is to build a steadily growing voice over business, beginning in 2015. I am still discovering my niche, but I feel the most comfortable in the commercial, e-learning and corporate narration genres. That's not to say that I am unwilling to explore other areas of the industry, but one has to start somewhere.

Having spent nearly 30 years working in the technology industry, I will probably never get completely away from it, and the skills I've acquired will definitely be an asset in voiceover. With my daughter in college, I find myself at a crossroads; contemplating what I'd like to do with the rest of my life. My daughter shares my love of movies, and telling stories - she's a theatre major and has a goal of becoming a casting director. Who knows, maybe someday she can find some work for her old Man.

I am excited about the future; a future that a stuttering little boy might never have imagined. If after reading my story and checking out my demos, you'd like to know more about me or would be interested in involving me in a project, please contact me.

Thanks for reading.