

## Inaugural TEDxSMU event expands horizons for local thinkers

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*Local version of my favorite international confab knocked it out of the park on their first try, as 500 people had their minds stretched for a full day.*

University Park — I went into **TEDxSMU** on Saturday with high hopes and a bit of trepidation: As a longtime fan of the international Technology Entertainment and Design (TED) conference — never able to attend, but avid watcher of the presentation videos online — I wondered whether our area's independent spin-off would measure up. Many of the attendees were in the same boat, lacking the ability to pony up the \$6,000 admission to the main TED event or the patience to bust through the waiting list. (The 2010 edition is already sold out.) We were all wondering if a local event with a comparatively cheap \$100 price could do Dallas proud.



To be fair, my expectations were already elevated, based both on the pedigree of the speakers and the folks who put it together. The charge to launch a local TED event was led by local TED stalwart Jim Young and SMU Bobby Lyle School of Engineering Dean Geoffrey Orsak. Young is a longtime “TEDster,” who is seen in the front couple rows on a large number of videos on the TED site. Singer-songwriter Jill Sobule, who is a TED regular and who performed at the SMU conference told me “It’s like you can play ‘Where’s Waldo’ with Jim when watching those videos.” I’d also met with Sharon Lyle, who took the lead in pulling the event logistics together and knew that the goal was not to put on a provincial, “poor-man’s” local TED, but an event that would be every bit as challenging and exciting as its namesake.

I can absolutely say that TEDxSMU far exceeded my high expectations and set an admirable bar for future programs. All the other attendees I talked to enthusiastically agreed with that assessment.

(I should note that *Pegasus News* was a minor sponsor of the event, based solely on my enthusiasm for TED and the folks involved. But I applied to be one of the five hundred admitted and paid for my ticket just like everyone else.)

The level of commitment to the program was perhaps best illustrated by one of the props: When I first walked in to the Caruth Auditorium at the Owens Art Center, I noticed what I assumed was an old podium the facility had with the Presidential Seal on the front. I initially wrote it off as a cheesy prop for one of the speakers until Orsak came on stage and explained its lineage. TED tradition dictates having a historical artifact representing the theme of the day. TEDxSMU organizers decided early on that they wanted the actual podium that President John F. Kennedy stood behind when issuing his challenge to put a man on the moon. That presented two challenges — finding it and then convincing its custodians to allow such a national treasure to travel. Running out of time and having still not found it, they sought help from speaker and astronaut Anousheh Ansari. The podium was found “in the Raiders of the Lost Ark warehouse, beside the Holy Grail,” and then negotiations to bring it to Dallas began. The podium arrived literally minutes before the program began and was watched over by a security guard who sat on the edge of the stage for most of the day.

That level of attention to detail and audacity in seeking the best for the conference showed throughout the day. It was clear that by sticking closely to the TED template, the SMU organizers were able to deliver a TED-quality experience.

That template involves a wide array of talks, loosely tied to a theme, all short and to the point. As an attendee of many conferences, I’m a big fan of TED’s eighteen-minute time limit. It means that speakers leave out all the biographical and

contextual crap that bogs down so many talks and get straight to their point. Brevity enforces a clarity of argument that keeps an audience engaged, even through a long day of talks.



The TEDxSMU team enhanced that with well-executed pacing, surrounding meatier talks with lighter ones and mixing in shorter three-minute talks from attendees to vary the day.

There was lots of TED pedigree in the room, including hosts Kelly Stoetzel (TED's content director and Jim Young's daughter) and Rives, a host for many other TED events. Many of the speakers had been on stage at the main TED conference and the A/V was led by folks who have worked the big conference.

### **TEDxKids**

On Friday, the TEDxSMU team also hosted the first-anywhere TEDxKids event, bringing many of the speakers we saw Saturday to a group of middle school students. While I didn't attend that event, reports were that the kids had as exciting a day as we did — we got to see a fun video from their day, including a segment where some of them filled in the blank

on the statement: "My parents don't know \_\_\_\_\_." (Our equivalent was "How I got this scar.")

Over the course of the day, we were treated to more than twenty thought-provoking presentations, most with first-rate audio-visuals. While many were not professional speakers, all were clear and articulate. TED Talks come with a mix of intellect and passion that you rarely see elsewhere, making for a long, but rewarding day.

Despite the high quality of the presentations, like all conferences, some of the best stuff happened in smaller conversations in the hall during breaks. The crowd was an eclectic mix of Dallas society — whom you'd expect to support a highbrow event at SMU — and (mostly younger) local tech mavens who follow TED online. Unlike many conferences, the speakers weren't isolated from the hoi polloi, creating an environment of mutual respect where noted, award-winning authors mixed with businesspeople, students and generally smart Dallasites — and where it didn't seem strange for a robe-clad didgeridoo player to saunter up and start playing for a cluster of new friends.

I'm not saying that TEDxSMU is a totally open event — attendees had to prove their commitment and credentials through an application process. But that selectiveness created an atmosphere in the hall that suggested that everyone in the room had something interesting to contribute. It made for intellectual networking that I really hope the organizers will find a way to extend and foster in the interim between now and the next edition.

The mix of local and international speakers (some with local connections) both grounded the event with a sense of place and gave it a universality that, intentionally or not, spoke well of SMU and DFW as an international intellectual force. If I went to a TEDx event in New York or Paris or Dubai, I'd measure it against what I saw in Dallas.

That's not to say that everything came off without a hitch, but there were precious few (mostly minor AV problems), which is remarkable, given that it's only been eight months since TED licensed the independent "x" events. I can't wait to see what they can pull off with a full year to plan.

### **SOME OF THE MANY HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DAY**

Noted aerial photographer Bobby Haas kicked off the proceedings with a talk that set the stage for a recurring theme: how seeing our world from on high can break down one's selfish view of their small corner — He took that theme to a "what would change everything" call for nations to act outside their narrow self-interest in the care of our planet. (Several attendees noted that with the recurring theme of environmentalism, it would have been nice if SMU had recycling bins in the venue as we threw away scads of bottles, cans and boxes.)

Longtime TED stalwart Dave Weaver explained how he explains his TED-thusiasm to others using a scale of depth based upon the terrorism warning level chart.

One of my favorites was Amory Lovins, who made a convincing argument that economic self-interest, rather than selfless do-gooderism, is the best answer to our energy-related problems.

Anousheh Ansari, the first female private space explorer, talked about what drove her relentless drive to get to the International Space Station, illustrated with some great video she took while there. I really dug her ubiquitous merging of the flags of her original and current countries of citizenship (US and Iran).

Co-host Rives' visually-aided poem about breaking into a New York dock to climb to the top of a crane was one of my favorite moments. It struck the perfect tone of rebelliousness, intellect and curiosity. I'm definitely going to be exploring more of his work.

Another TED regular, singer-songwriter Jill Sobule, performed four songs over two different sessions, delighting the crowd on both occasions. She also provided one of the most hilarious moments of the day by dropping an f-bomb in a song about Googling ex-lovers while a 12 year-old kid held her lyrics-book. The crowd seemed to respond best to a song explaining why, if you must commit a murder, Texas is the wrong place to do so.

Ira Greenberg talked about the intersection of art and computer programming: "Computation is the creative medium of our time." An installation of his digital art was also on display.

One of the more locally relevant talks came from Joshua Prince-Ramus, architect of the new Wyly Theatre at the Performing Arts Center that opens in downtown Dallas this week. He started at a more universal level — criticizing the architecture profession for allowing itself to become confined to aesthetics and talked convincingly about the need to be involved in all aspects of a building's creation from conception to constraints to construction to understanding its use cases. It's clear that approach was taken in the design of the Wyly Theatre, with its Transformer-esque design, literally allowing the building to reconfigure itself for a wide array of uses. I'm even more excited about seeing it in action now.

Oceanographer Dave Gallo gave one of the more thought-provoking talks, explaining how his organization explores the ocean and putting in perspective the water issues the world faces. (If the Earth was the size of a basketball, its water could be condensed into a ping-pong ball; and the fresh water into a pinhead.)

Three-minute talks from local attendees provided interesting breaks in the action and some of the more memorable catch-phrases of the day: Stan Green delivered a poem about Pluto's loss of planetary status, leading host Rives to riff that "Size doesn't matter, but thickness does." Kyle Martin made a case for running barefoot — even on Texas trails. And in one of the most, ahem, unique and most-referenced talks of the day, Bill Aston eloquently described the migratory habits of whales — trying to make the point that because multiple males are required for mating, perhaps the term "gangbanging" has an unfairly negative connotation.

Probably the biggest acclaim for a local was for 13 year-old Lewis Warren, Jr., a home-schooled piano prodigy who first left the room dumbstruck and then received one of the first standing ovations of the day.

Another standing ovation came for the inspirational story of locally-raised Rogers Hartmann, who has been fighting Dystonia for the past year and a half. She has not only far exceeded the mobility level her diagnosis brought, but she's become an advocate and support system for others with the disease. Much of what she covered in her talk is in this *July D Magazine* article. Even more inspirational for me was seeing her hop up on stage (without her cane) when a later presenter asked for volunteer assistants.

I'm not afraid to admit that parts of SMU Theology prof William J Abraham's talk were over my head — I think that happens when one is fusing science, philosophy and theology to create a "grand theory of everything." I think he's trying to prove Free Will.

Arthur Benjamin is a TED regular who can square large numbers faster than your calculator can. Really.

Greg Harper is the only person I've ever met who has a gadget collection that completely shames mine. And he hauls it all in a carry-on bag that must give the TSA fits.

The improv music and dance performance from SMU's Kim Corbet and BL Lacerta was one of the more unusual parts of the presentation. It polarized the audience, who seemed to alternately love it or be completely baffled by it. (Count me in the second camp.) It provided a dual entertainment for those who could see the guard for Kennedy's podium, who looked like he was about to melt down every time a dancer got near the historical artifact.

Another local, former Richards Group employee Tanya Pinto told the inspiring story of her work to fight malnutrition in her native India.

One of the most popular speakers was William Kamkwamba, whose book *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* is a current bestseller. At TEDxSMU, he ran out of copies to autograph before he even spoke. He and his co-author told the tale of how he saved his family and his village from famine by studying windmill plans in the local library. He also looked like he was having a great time at the after-party.

Austin filmmaker Turk Pipkin talked about his nonprofit The Nobility Project and his upcoming documentary, *One Peace at a Time*, which features a diverse cast with the likes of Desmond Tutu and Willie Nelson.

Aaron Reedy told how, with a teacher's grant, he kayaked the Mississippi river during flood season, testing water quality — and used that experience to inspire his students study of water.

Towards the end of the day, I was really entranced by Jeffrey Talley's description about how his work in Iraq helped turn around some of the worst urban problems — and did more to reduce the number of attacks than any number of guns could. It echoed one of the day's top recurring themes: multidisciplinary cooperation. We're lucky in that Talley is now a part of SMU's Lyle School and will be turning some of his attention to domestic problems.

The day ended with a four-song performance from The Polyphonic Spree, who was the perfect fit for such an eclectic, energetic, but thoughtful event. They closed with an extended version of my favorite of their work: "(Section 19) When the Fool Becomes a King."

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