

TEDxSMU upends conventional wisdom

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By Cheryl Hall

I'm pretty sure I was in Dallas on Saturday.

After all, TEDxSMU was held in the Caruth Auditorium of my alma mater.

But the eclectic audience, the extraordinary array of speakers and the fast-paced, sensory-overloaded event were unlike anything else I've experienced in 40 years as a Dallasite.

Gerald Turner, president of Southern Methodist University, was thrilled as he surveyed the diverse congregation waiting for the doors to open.



Geoffrey Orsak, dean of the Bobby B. Lyle School of Engineering at SMU, kicks off TEDxSMU. The event featured offbeat ways to look at the world and solve its problems, such as using peanut butter bars to end malnutrition.

"There are people from around the country who've obviously never been here," he said. "But there are even some Dallasites who may have only driven by or attended a Tate [Lecture Series event]. This shows the unique niche we're trying to create, which is to address worldwide issues through engineering."

I got one of the 475 seats without going through the application process because I'd written an advance column about SMU bringing TED to

Big D. But I had no idea what I was getting into when I showed up Saturday morning.

TED is a small, New York-based nonprofit group that puts on annual convocations in Long Beach, Calif., and Oxford, England, with speakers such as Bill Gates, Jane Goodall and Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*.

The SMU event was TED-sanctioned but put on by the school with help from sponsors.

We were promised a daylong odyssey of the mind involving technology, entertainment and design – hence the acronym TED – that would make us contemplate ways we could change the world.

Yeah, sure, I thought, figuring I'd make my escape at lunchtime.

But by the time we broke for food, I'd been TEDxed to another realm with no desire to leave. So had everyone else, from the response I got.

Why should you care?

Organizers promise a return engagement next year, and you just might want to apply.

In a town notorious for early departures, there were as many people standing for a performance by the Polyphonic Spree at the end of the program as there were sitting for the big-screen opener of Bobby Haas' aerial photography nine hours before.

In between, we heard:

- What it's like to be an astronaut aboard the International Space Station.
- The unusual "teamwork" needed for giant whale copulation.
- How to get the United States off oil by 2040.
- How to get our minds to work faster than calculators.
- How living with a terminal, excruciating disease can be fulfilling.
- The engineering marvels of Dallas' new Dee and Charles Wyle Theatre.
- How to help solve malnutrition among India's orphans with peanut butter bars.
- Why our ocean world may be more important than our dirt one.

Each topic was covered in less than 18 minutes.

Kennedy lectern

Two minutes after the event was supposed to begin, Geoffrey Orsak, dean of the Bobby B. Lyle School of Engineering, had breathed a sigh of relief when the lectern used by President John F. Kennedy to announce America's mission to the moon was placed on stage.

The icon for the symposium's theme, What Will Change Everything?, was his brainchild. Orsak had found the lectern at the Johnson Space Center and persuaded NASA to lend it out for the first time.

SMU stationed two armed guards behind a curtain to stop anyone from touching or standing behind the lectern.

I could see one guard's eyes grow wide when a modern dance ensemble came close to it. The lectern was removed shortly thereafter.

TEDsters, as aficionados of the national organization are known, talk about "TED moments" – crystallized gee-whiz seconds where synapses snap.

For Dallas Arts District developer Lucy Billingsley, it was seeing that Dallas really does have an abundance of people who want to save the world. "You've got brilliant thinkers – some known, but many unknown. They're the undercurrent of tomorrow. To be here is to see our future."

Many credited Haas with setting the standard for the rest of the day.

He produces books of aerial photography for National Geographic when he's not doing investment deals in Dallas. Haas urged us to ignore national borders and cultural differences to defeat global pollution, which is plain to see from the air.

"This threat is the Gettysburg of mankind's civil war between himself and his home," he said. "In this civil war, we will test the contours of the human spirit itself. ... We should not cower from that challenge. We should relish it and embrace it. It gives us the chance to prove we deserve the blessings in the first place."

One listener, SMU anthropology professor Ron Wetherington, took that message to heart. "The aerial perspective of things got me to thinking that the reality doesn't change but our view of it does."

Wetherington's son, Adam, a 27-year-old college student, said his day was made by a 13-year-old, home-schooled music prodigy from Dallas, Lewis Warren, who mesmerized the audience with his piano mastery and then stunned it with his maturity.

Lewis said he'd like to be his generation's Johann Sebastian Bach because he brought together ecclesiastical and secular works to change the world with his music.

"I was like, 'Wow!' " Adam Wetherington said. "My goal is just to make it to 75. He's setting the bar really high."

'Mathmagian'

Rabbi Jake Jackofsky was shaking his head after Arthur Benjamin, a self-proclaimed "mathmagian," used only brainpower to solve an audience-created equation with a 10-digit answer. (Most calculators only have eight digits.)

"So often you go to a concert and you know what to expect," Jackofsky said. "Here's something that boggles the mind. There are tricks to it, but this is beyond trickery."

For law student Brandy Davis, the highlight was Amory Lovins (picked by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential minds of 2009), who solved our energy crisis and rectified ozone depletion in 18 minutes.

"He made it seem so easy," she said. "It really hit me that the issue of energy independence is not a scientific problem, but a political problem."

Jim Crupi, founder of Strategic Leadership Solutions Inc. of Plano and a veteran TEDster, was moved by a visual shown by ocean explorer David Gallo. The world stripped of its blue water was a brown basketball. Next to it was a blue pingpong ball that represented all of the Earth's water. Next to that was a blue pea-size dot representing all the fresh water in the world. "It blew my mind," Crupi said.

I, too, was struck by something Gallo showed the crowd: a photograph from space showing Japan completely surrounded by an aura of bluish lights.

"Those are fishing fleets with their lights facing down into the sea and bouncing back up into space," Gallo explained. "The poor ocean gets a double whammy. One, we're poisoning it slowly; and two, through our fishing activities we've actually managed to collapse most of the world's large fisheries."

I'll never enjoy sushi with the same abandon.

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