

The Champion of Hugs

One of my favorite motivational speakers – and the source of the hugging exercise I often employ in various Life Care gatherings – is gone. And the world is a sadder place because of it.



This announcement is a bit of an embarrassment for me because Greg Risberg, the Chicago humorist and professional speaker, passed away on Nov. 11, 2014 – and I didn't discover it until this week when I went online to see what was going on with him.

Risberg's signature speech was *The Importance of Touching*, in which he would explain how vital touch is, and how everyone needs at least 12 hugs a day.

We first got to know Risberg when we scheduled him to be the keynote speaker for Life Care in 1989 when our annual management meeting was held in Scottsdale, Arizona. He was an instant hit. And through the years, associates have mentioned his name and referred to that speech.

In delivering hundreds of motivational talks all over the country, Greg Risberg would often begin on a personal note, describing his own childhood and what it was like being raised by a Swedish immigrant father.

Painting a picture of a loving relationship — although not outwardly so — he'd unveil a copy of the famous Grant Wood painting "American Gothic," revealing his uncanny resemblance to the male farmer with the pitchfork, to uproarious laughter.

"He loved sharing with his audiences funny and poignant stories that would touch their hearts, as well as their minds," said his wife of 27 years, Madeleine Van Hecke. "He tried to renew hope in people, remind them of their own intrinsic value and help them think about what is most important in their lives." And he did that with Life Care.

Risberg, 67, died in Alexandria, Virginia. He collapsed inside his car in a parking lot before a speaking engagement and died of natural causes, his wife said.

Over more than three decades, Risberg brought his "Humor with a Message" programs to more than half a million people in 49 states, as well as Canada, England and Australia.

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In that appearance with us in Scottsdale, he was so funny when he told his various stories and got volunteers from the audience to try different hugs. His talks made people laugh. They also made people cry.

Risberg was well-known on the speakers' circuit and a member of the National Speakers Association, a group that in 2002 awarded him its highest earned designation of Certified Speaking Professional. He also received the Wordsmith Award for speaking excellence from the Illinois chapter of the NSA in 1991.

A Chicago native, Risberg was raised in the Andersonville neighborhood on the North Side. He was a graduate of Amundsen High School and earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Roosevelt University. In 1981, Risberg began speaking professionally, initially to church and civic groups in the Chicago area. A few years later he spoke before an audience of insurance professionals at a meeting of the Million Dollar Round Table, after which his career took off.

Those of us who heard him in Scottsdale will carry memories of how disarmingly genuine he was, and how engaging and kind.

And we will remember – and take his advice – about the importance of 12 hugs a day.

– Beecher Hunter