E\r\n\r\nvery year around Valentine’s Day, traffic on the Lowell House Speeches Project’s Vimeo page spikes. The first time this happened was the night of February 13, 2011, just after Meghan Cleary ’11, L ’16—then a Lowell House senior—gave the eighteenth Lowell Speech. Cleary spoke of being at pre-season cross-country training, a few weeks before the start of her freshman year, when her dad suffered a cardiac arrest.

“I came home from New Hampshire to find my dad in a coma,” Cleary explained as her speech entered its second minute. She continued:

When his heart had stopped, he had gone without oxygen for several minutes, and his brain had been damaged. The doctors didn’t know how badly. He remained in a coma for about a week, which was the most terrifying of my life. When he finally woke up, his memory was gone. He couldn’t remember how to speak or swallow. He couldn’t remember how to walk. He knew nothing of his life. He was a 50-year old newborn infant. A blank slate.

During the next few minutes, Cleary offered a story, linked to the eve of Valentine’s Day, that brought the crowded Lowell House dining hall—some 100-odd students, tutors, dining staff, and Lowell House master Diana Eck and co-master Dorothy Austin—to stunned silence and then catharsis. Every Valentine’s Day, on e-mail, Facebook, Vimeo, and the Lowell House website, this process repeats itself in electronic miniature. I played the speech for my girlfriend this past February 14; by the end of the speech, she was weeping.

This winter, the Lowell Speeches will enter its fifth season. During the past four years, nearly 150 Lowell House students have crafted and delivered more than 175 five-minute speeches on topics of personal significance. Each speech is filmed and uploaded to the Web, where most students choose to make them public. The videos have been played more than 31,000 times in 113 countries, from Mexico to Madagascar, from Malaysia to Moldova.

The Lowell Speeches Project

“Community-building magic” through public, personal reflections

by MICHAEL ZUCKERMAN

Talking about her father’s coma, Meghan Cleary ’11 brought Lowell listeners to stunned silence.
“Everybody in your life is going to have an idea of what you should talk about—that giant, juicy question—and you should get them on the hook there.”

The presentations take place on weeknights throughout the first seven weeks of the spring term, but the project begins in early December. That’s when Sandy Alexander, J.D-M.P.P. ’06, a resident scholar who founded the program with Eck and Austin, affixes an enormous sign-up sheet with 50 slots (in 120-point type)—two per night—and a fat Sharpie marker to the wall outside the dining hall.

The slots fill—giving way to a waiting list—within days, during which time the speakers are bombarded with e-mails meant to acclimate them to what Alexander terms the “intensity” of the project. Everyone who has signed up is then invited to a “Mandatory Speech”—sometimes in the Junior Common Room, sometimes in Eck and Austin’s residence—where they are plopped into a pod as the “farmer.” The unfamiliar fruit temporarily transforms the eater’s taste buds to make sour taste sweet—setting the tone for a program that is, by turns, intense, whimsical, surprising, and transformative.

The dessert begins a three-month collaboration in which much of the Lowell community participates. Each student speaker chooses a member of the Lowell Senior Common Room (SCR)—a body of resident tutors, graduate students, and faculty members affiliated with the House— to work with, one-on-one. Each “SCR mentor” serves as an adviser throughout the project, as the student chooses a topic and hones it into a polished text under the 750-word limit. As their speech night approaches, groups of two or four speakers meet for rehearsals to get reactions from each other and from Lowell tutors who volunteer to give feedback. On each speech night, just after dinner concludes, each of the night’s one or two speakers is introduced by her SCR mentor and then delivers her speech from a podium in the center of the dining hall, often to a crowd of more than 100 Lowellians and guests. Through it all, Eck, Austin, and Alexander serve as mentors at-large, dropping into rehearsals and working with speakers across the project. (Each has also served as the official SCR mentor to many Austin, for example, was Cleary’s mentor.)

I am not a disinterested bystander here: I helped Alexander pull off the first season of the Lowell Speeches in 2011, gave a speech myself, and now, as a resident tutor, have served with Seth Packrone ’10, L ’15, as one of the program’s two coordinators. What I have witnessed during the past four years convinces me that this project is worth sharing. The lengthy journey Ager describes is closely aligned with Alexander’s second rule: “Time.”

“The valuable things in this project all take time,” Alexander tells the audience at the dessert. “When we asked you to say what you’re hoping to accomplish, you named things that are really precious, but also really slow. So, for example, you want to reflect on your life. You want to learn more about yourself. You want to say something honest. You want to inspire people. Those things are not going to happen in a hurry.”

At last December’s Mandatory Dessert, as he has every year, Alexander unveiled the latest iteration of the Rules for the Lowell Speeches—his not-too-serious way of shaping the atmosphere of the project.

The first rule of the project is “Team,” and Alexander tells the speakers it’s his favorite—and not just in the Lowell Speeches project. “It’s my first rule in all of life,” he explains. “If you become obsessed with this one rule, then wonderful things will happen to you all the time.”

Alexander exhorts students to “fish for teammates” in the project, using the “fabulous piece of bait” that “you’ve been invited to give a speech at Harvard on any topic of your choice and you have to pick what to talk about.” “Start there!” he exhails. “Talk about it with your mother. Talk about it with your lover. Go get a haircut and talk about it with your barber! Everybody in your life is going to have an idea of what you should talk about—that giant, juicy question—and you should get them on the hook there.”

Students I’ve spoken with have valued the team-building dimension of the program, especially the exposure to tutors and faculty members in the SCR. Perry Choi ’15—who spoke as a sophomore about stepping outside his comfort zone and this year, as a junior, about what he’d learned from battling depression—refers to the “intimate mentorship from a Senior Common Room member of your choice” as a “rare, invaluable opportunity.”

The mentors, for their part, seem to enjoy participating as well—and 64 faculty members, administrators, and graduate students have advised student speakers these past four years. Harvard Business School senior fellow David Ager—who previously taught Sociology 109: “Leadership and Organizations,” one of the most popular undergraduate courses— has advised nine student speakers so far. “I think it’s great to have an opportunity to work with students,” he explains, describing the joy of watching the “evolution from a little kernel of an idea” to a written, rewritten, and practiced text. Most rewarding, he says, is “when I get to go on that entire journey—going from ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do’ to getting to go hear this wonderful talk and see the audience totally engrossed.”

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This theme leads to an idea about writing that, in recent years, Alexander has taken to illustrating by bringing a hydraulic jack to the dessert.

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“Writing is a tool like a three-ton jack,” he declares, holding it up. “If used properly, writing concentrates weeks of ordinary-strength work into a few moments of superpower.”

He continues:

Imagine that Harvard requires you, as a requirement for graduation, to lift a truck that weighs 6,000 pounds. You could walk over to the truck, and you could try to pick it up with your two hands...and you would not be able to lift it—and you would not graduate. Unless you have a special tool and you know how to use it...[The jack] takes the superhuman task of lifting the truck, and it breaks it down into very many human-strength tasks. And you've gotta do them over and over, and you've gotta do them right.

Now here's the point: writing really is a special device for intellectual work, just like my jack is for lifting. If you spread the work out over a lot of time, and you make the right kind of effort, over and over again, writing and rewriting and rewriting, then you can create insight and you can express ideas with superhuman force. Force that otherwise is not possible. The movements of a thoughtful writer are more complicated than the movements you need to operate my jack. But they can still be learned and practiced in this project.

“There are not many superpower tricks in life,” Alexander concludes, “but there are some. And we are going to use them in this project.” As he says this, his five- and eight-year-old daughters, Susan and Lucy, use the jack to lift him high into the air, until his head almost touches the ceiling.

Eponymously, the project also provides valuable public-speaking practice, something that many students say is in short supply elsewhere on campus.

Avinaash Subramanian ’14, who delivered rollicking addresses—on weight-loss tactics, attempts to avoid aging, and finding himself amid academic setbacks—during his three years in Lowell, says he practiced public speaking throughout high school, but found it tough to pursue the passion at Harvard. “There are lots of opportunities for writing here, but not a lot of opportunities for actually voicing your opinion or speaking on a topic,” he volunteers. Participating in Lowell Speeches, he says, has been a way of “rekindling” the love of oratory he discovered in high school.

Though some students, like Subramanian, come in with lots of speaking experience, many—like Cleary—are trying it out for the first time. “I remember being like, ‘Oh my God, I can't do that, I'm not good at public speaking—I'm not going to be able to stand up and give a speech,’” recalls Cleary, who is now a nonresident tutor in Lowell and advises students in the project. “I think it's a really useful exercise in public speaking. It introduces students to the way that you write a speech and perform it—that it's a long process, that you have to hone it and practice it a lot—and [to] the kinds of things you think about: making sure you're speaking slowly, making sure you're speaking clearly. Those weren't things I learned anywhere else at Harvard.”

Faculty members praise the public-speaking practice as well. “These are things that people, no matter who they are, are going to have to do in life, so it's great to have this kind of practice and feedback,” Eck notes. “I learned a lot about public speaking...”
As important as public-speaking practice is, most students in -from Expository Writing 40 (which, in one recent year, received -ate demand for such training dramatically exceeds supply. Apart -develop that in them.”

motivate them to action—I think we do have a responsibility to -ple in ways that engage them and capture their imagination and -things in the world, the ability to speak to large numbers of peo -pire to create leaders,” he reasons. “Insofar as we are trying to -is central to Harvard’s purpose. “I think, in our mission, we as- -20 other people and share your ideas about a reading—it’s a very -fore needs an audience. It’s one thing to sit around a table with -text and not being wedded to it.”

Ager agrees that the practice serves an important curricular need: “It’s a very specific, core skill that takes practice and therefore needs an audience. It’s one thing to sit around a table with 20 other people and share your ideas about a reading—it’s a very different thing to have to prepare five minutes’ worth of an idea and then deliver it in front of 100 people.” That skill, he suggests, is central to Harvard’s purpose. “I think, in our mission, we aspire to create leaders,” he reasons. “Insofar as we are trying to turn out great women and men who will go forth and do great things in the world, the ability to speak to large numbers of people in ways that engage them and capture their imagination and motivate them to action—I think we do have a responsibility to develop that in them.”

Underlying all these comments is the sense that undergraduate demand for such training dramatically exceeds supply. Apart from Expository Writing 40 (which, in one recent year, received more than 100 applications for 12 slots) and some public-speaking training in other courses, funded through the Elson Family Arts Initiative, classroom opportunities to practice writing and delivering a crafted text are slim. Ethan Pierce ’13, who spoke in 2013 about coming out as a gay man and an artist, says, “You can take a public-speaking course, or a course that engages specifically with public speaking, or you can join the debate team, or you can be one of the Class Day speakers—those are essentially your podiums. I think it’s great that the Lowell Speeches [program] has created another podium, and has ignited the potential for creating further podiums within other spaces at Harvard.”

As important as public-speaking practice is, most students insist it is secondary to the value of having an opportunity to reflect deeply on something important to them. “I think one of the main purposes is to have a chance to show people a side of you that they might not see on a daily basis,” Subramanian reflects. “I think of Perry Choi talking about mental health—it was a hard speech to give, and it was really helpful to understand that other people are going through these same things, and everyone has a story to tell, and you don’t have to hide it. And not just him, but a lot of the other speech-givers as well.”

Choi agrees, writing: “I’ve given two speeches so far, and although my speaking and writing skills have improved from these experiences, more importantly, I have learned something profound and new about me.”

The process can also stir up strong emotions. Vi Nguyen ’15 used her speech to reflect on her “first love,” at age eight: a friend named Aidan who, four years later, moved away to transition genders, and whom Nguyen hasn’t seen since. “I found giving the speech to be very cathartic,” she explains. “I have been holding Aidan’s story inside me because I was ashamed, but I’ve also been waiting for the right time and place to speak about him.”

Pierce spoke similarly of his speech:

“It was difficult to tell, but there was a cathartic process to giving this story to other people. And I really hoped that it would give some students here access to a narrative that they could relate to and use to at least let percolate some idea of coming out in their own lives—whether that’s coming out in a role that’s nontraditional to them, or their families, or their backgrounds, or the perception that people have of them; or in terms of a new activity or a new profession; or whether it has to do with a new identity, religion, profession, or sexual politics. There really are so many ways to come out today, and so I wanted to interweave the way I came out.

Speakers value this radical introspection—“writing a speech that only you could give,” as Sandy Alexander puts it—for its own sake. But with 50 speeches condensed into seven weeks in a House dining hall, all this reflection also amalgamates into a kind of community-building magic.

“I felt so much more connected to the community after giving my speech,” Cleary recalls. “I think Lowell does an awesome job of that already, but the speeches help. After giving my speech, there were whole groups of people in Lowell that I became friends with that I probably wouldn’t have been friends with, but because I had given this very personal speech, it was like I had opened a door.”

Subramanian feels the same way. After his “Mr. Body Beautiful” speech, he recalls, “Suddenly, in the dining hall, I’d have people coming up to me, and they’d be like, ‘Ainaaash!’ And I’d think to myself, ‘Okay, who are you?’ And they’d be like, ‘I saw your speech—it was awesome.’”

At the dessert, Alexander is careful to point out this effect. “Before we leave the rules for tonight,” he declares, “we should agree on some good thing that is going to happen as a result of you following these rules. And I know, because this happens to me several times every year...I’m in the dining hall after a speech and somebody comes over to me and they say, ‘Sandy, what’s up? I’ve known that speaker for three years—she’s my blockmate. I see her every day. And I just learned something I never knew before!’”

“These people, they look at me like I’m gonna give ’em an expla-
The Lowell Speeches project is not the only place on campus where this kind of reflecting and sharing goes on. Lowell borrowed the model from a place where it has been under way, in some form, since 1636: Morning Prayers at Harvard's Memorial Church, which features a five-minute talk by a member of the community (and which Austin was running when she, Alexander, and Eck invented the Lowell program).

In recent years, versions of the Lowell Speeches have begun to pop up in other Houses as well. Kirkland Reflections, initiated and run by Nikhat Dharani '14, featured eight Kirkland students speaking on three Tuesdays this past April; Dharani has been pleased to see some of the dynamics that Lowell students value taking root. “There were topics people talked about that I had no idea were important to them,” she reflects. “It didn’t show up anywhere else, and it wouldn’t have shown up anywhere else.”

Like many of the Lowell speakers, Dharani locates much of the program’s value in the practice of reflection itself. “I see this as a learning opportunity for ourselves,” she says. “There are so many different things going on in the different communities we’re a part of, and having speeches or reflections is a way to ask how we’re connected to those things, how we’re influencing others, and how they’re influencing us.”

The diffusion of the Lowell Speeches into other Houses (Dharani notes that Adams and Cabot have also piloted versions) is, in its own way, an embodiment of Alexander’s sixth rule: “Afterlife.”

This rule arises directly from Alexander’s personal experience: after giving a talk at Morning Prayers about his childhood choirmaster, he e-mailed the text to three people from his family’s church in North Carolina; the speech ultimately found its way to the choirmaster himself. “I realized,” Alexander recalls, “that I had given this guy one of the best gifts I was ever going to give anybody—this five-minute speech I had written about this experience that we shared. And instead of just filing it, I e-mailed it to those three people. It terrifies me to think that if I had not e-mailed it to those three people, I might have buried this gift—killed it.”

He stresses this point to the speakers; it also explains the substantial time invested in filming and publishing each speech. “These speeches deserve to be shared and read and heard,” he explains, “so we try to make that happen.”

The Internet afterlife of the speeches allows me, and many others, to return to Cleary’s speech each Valentine’s Day, and to many more speeches every year. Just as importantly, it has allowed speakers to share their reflections far beyond the yellow walls of the Lowell dining hall.

“I guess what I really didn’t expect was all the stuff that happened after the speech,” Cleary confesses. “I sort of thought it would be a cool thing to do—to talk about a story that had happened to me and share that with people—but I certainly didn’t expect to be talking about it now, four years later. Or that people would be really affected by it. My brothers texted me after it and told me they were crying, which was not a normal thing for them to do. It had become a hard thing for people in my family to talk about—and [after the speech] it was kind of just out there. You could have conversations about it.”

The speech, she adds, has also connected her to new people at Harvard Law School. “I was at a law-journal editing session,” she recalls, “and I was working with this boy for a few hours in a small space. At the end, we were just chatting, and it came up that we had both gone to Harvard...so the standard question was, ‘What House were you in?’ I mentioned that I was in Lowell, and he mentioned something like, ‘It seems like people who were in Lowell feel really connected to it in a way that’s different from other Houses.’ And then he said, ‘I know about the Lowell Speeches project. There was this girl who had given a speech about her dad, and her dad had had, like, a stroke or something, and had lost his memory. And the speech totally went viral, and all of my friends still share it with each other on Valentine’s Day, and we watch it every year.’”

“And I said, ‘Yeah—that was my speech.’” And it was such a strange moment, because all of a sudden he knew this very personal thing about me. But it was cool.”

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Other Lowell Speeches

selected by Harvard Magazine editors:

Andrew Campbell ’14, “An Olympic Failure”
Marina Connelly ’12, G ’19, “...And Words Are All I Have”
Abiola Laniyonu ’13, “The Shared Embrace of Grief”
Peggy Mativo ’14, “The Year of the Dream”
Chloe Veron ’14, “The Definition of Normal”

Many of the student speeches are available online at http://vimeo.com/lowellspeeches.