



Norma Adams-Wade: Lengthy illness leads to public victory for speaker

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NORMA ADAMS-WADE

Winning a history-making prize with Toastmasters International this month was a huge public victory for **LaShunda Rundles** of Dallas.

But a quiet life-or-death choice she made during a painful, lengthy illness brought a greater personal triumph that helped stir her winning fervor.

Ms. Rundles is the first black woman and only the fourth woman to win the coveted Toastmasters International Speech Championship trophy in the organization's 70-year history. It has been 22 years since a woman won.

Ms. Rundles, 38, was the winner from among more than 2,000 international contestants from 92 countries who met at the group's convention Aug. 13-16 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Enthusiasts call the contest the "Olympics of oratory" and the "World Series of public speaking." Ms. Rundles, who lives in Oak Cliff, is a member of the Region 3, District 50 Town North Trendsetters home club in Dallas. Contestants reach the international meet after a yearlong competition, surviving five elimination rounds at club, area, division, district and regional levels.

For Ms. Rundles, winning was routine growing up as the youngest child of parents who were educators and a father and grandfather who were preachers. She grew up in Detroit, Texas, near Paris, and often spoke in church programs.

Ms. Rundles was class valedictorian and had scholarships waiting when she became ill with lupus as a high school senior. After postponing college, she earned a business management degree from the University of North Texas in 1992. She worked as a finance manager until her illness worsened.

"I was depressed for a while," she said. "I was angry."

Capturing the worldwide speaker's championship is part of her triumphant journey after a lengthy, painful struggle with the disease and related illnesses that nearly took her life three years ago. About 20 years ago, doctors found that Ms. Rundles had systemic lupus, which affects the joints and other tissues. She has endured six surgeries and a critical bout that reduced her to a mere 90 pounds and left her unable to eat or care for herself.

She asked God to let her die. Soon, the far-reaching implications of a simple question from her only child, son **Dennis Pearson**, now 13, caused her to resume her fight for life. "Mama, you're not going to die on me, are you?" he asked. When she considered the impact of her illness on him, she began to fight for her life.

She still has good days and bad days, she said. But her speeches and delivery reflect a hopeful second-chance attitude, others say.

"You feel like you're in the struggle with her," said fellow club member **Cynthia Brown**.

"She's genuine," said her sister, **Sonya Rundles**.

LaShunda said she is writing two books to spread hope to others and plans to become a professional speaker. To learn more, call 949-858-8255 or visit www.sixminutes.dlugan.com/2008/08/15.

"I still live with a lot of pain," she said. "But for seven minutes on that stage I don't feel a thing, and it's the best feeling in the world."