

# SPEAKER



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Q&A WITH SURVIVOR  
IMMACULÉE ILIBAGIZA

**DECONSTRUCTING AN  
NSA KEYNOTE**

**"BEING KELSEY"**  
TURNING WEAKNESSES  
INTO STRENGTHS

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# ***Being Kelsey***

Overcoming physical challenges, Kelsey Tainsh exemplifies “persistence” and forges ahead with courage and conviction.

**By Barbara Parus  
with June Cline, CSP**

**I**n the face of adversity, one can either shrink away or embrace it and grow stronger. Speaking out about her own life and daily obstacles, professional speaker Kelsey Tainsh, 25, believes that life’s struggles are meant to teach us lessons and be better versions of ourselves. Her catchphrase inspires her audiences: See Differently. Try Differently. Live Differently.

Kelsey stirs your senses, challenges your thinking and wakes up your attitude. She encourages audiences to realize that anything is possible with determination and persistence. Kelsey is happiest onstage and, even though some people view her as a victim, she considers herself a powerful young business professional who had brain tumors, and now helps people.

## **From the Beginning**

Kelsey, the smallest of triplets, weighed only 3 lbs. 12 oz. when she was born, but she had the loudest cry in the hospital. When she started bumping into walls and rubbing her eyes constantly a few years later, her parents knew something was amiss and took Kelsey for an MRI. Her first brain tumor was diagnosed at age 5, followed by surgical removal, radiation and a full recovery.







**Kelsey Tainsh on stage at the Inbound 2015 Conference, which attracted 14,000 attendees.**

The next 10 childhood years were idyllic with no health issues. During this time, Kelsey helped the Make-A-Wish Foundation raise more than \$250,000 in their Stories of Light Campaign, landing her first speaking gig with the organization at age 11.

Kelsey also started Pet-a-Pup, an organization that gives children who are hospitalized a chance to play with puppies. She even spent some time in Los Angeles, where she landed roles in a variety of television shows (*Desperate Housewives*, *Gilmore Girls*) and films (*Rumor Has It*, and *Larry the Cable Guy: Health Inspector*).

In her spare time, Kelsey excelled in athletics. By the time she was 13, she was ranked second nationally and third in the world in girls' wakeboarding. In high school, she switched to lightweight rowing and helped her team win a state championship.

In the 10th grade, Kelsey started to have seizures and migraines. An MRI revealed that another brain tumor was back in the same place it had been 10 years earlier. A second surgery resulted in a paralyzing right-sided stroke. Instantly, she went from a world-class wakeboard champion to paralysis. She had to re-learn how to feed and dress herself, tie her shoes, walk and other activities necessary for daily living.

“My goal is to bring a message to others of empowered change in leadership, motivation, inclusion and overcoming adversity and obstacles.”

#### **From Lemons to Lemonade**

Instead of feeling bitter, Kelsey uses the platform to encourage and educate young people. “I wouldn’t change a thing that happened to me because I wouldn’t be speaking today. My uniqueness makes me different, but the challenges I face as a speaker and young business woman are the same as everyone else,” Kelsey says. “My goal is to bring a message to others of empowered change in leadership, motivation, inclusion and overcoming adversity and obstacles.”

She recants her medical history on stage for her medical clients, but only touches on it for youth groups. “I use self-deprecating humor to poke fun of myself and draw people in, because I know the first thing they’re thinking is ‘Why does she walk funny?’” Kelsey explains. “In this way, my biggest weakness becomes my biggest strength.”

Ed Gerety, CSP, who speaks on youth leadership, is one of Kelsey’s mentors and biggest fans. “She is a great role model to teens on resiliency and overcoming challenges and setbacks in life,” he said. “The youth of today connect with her powerful message, authenticity and passion.”

After completing her degree in Recreation and Event Management with high honors from University of Florida, Kelsey worked for The Coca-Cola Company—who believed in her when others did not—before embarking on a full-time career in professional speaking. Now she travels extensively and, as of this writing, is in the middle of her biggest speaking tour, with engagements in San Diego, New York, St. Louis, Boston and other locations. In September 2015, Kelsey was a featured speaker at Inbound 2015 in Boston.



Her client roster includes The Coca-Cola Company, as well as Harvard Medical School, Boston Children's Hospital, High Point University, The Society for Pediatric Anesthesia, California Association of Student Leaders, and Florida Association of Student Councils, to name a few.

### Launching Her Platform

Everyone can pinpoint a defining moment that launched their career. For Kelsey, it happened at the 2013 NSA Convention, when she delivered a keynote for the Youth Program and received a standing ovation. In the three months leading up to the event, June Cline, CSP, helped her craft the keynote that would change her life.

They came up with an ingenious idea for an interactive exercise as part of her keynote based on the fact that Kelsey cannot see the midpoint of both eyes to the right corner of each eye. Kelsey laughs, "This explains why I keep running into that same pole."

To illustrate how Kelsey sees the world, June's husband, Jerry Cline, created the prototype for sunglasses with lenses that were blacked out from the center of the lens to the right corner of each side. For the exercise, Kelsey instructed her Youth Program audience to put on the glasses, partner up with someone, and, while looking straight at each other, use their right hand to high-five each other. By doing so, they could "see" what Kelsey does not see.

The exercise was a resounding success because the attendees kept missing their hands, and immediately realized how difficult it was to do a simple high-five. Even the older guys in the back row were overheard saying, "Whoa, this is really weird!" After her presentation, the kids talked about her in the hallways, told their parents about her, and were seen wearing the special glasses throughout the conference.



But it wasn't just the sunglasses that made her presentation a hit. With Cline's guidance, Kelsey created a sequence of stories aimed at the youth audience. A favorite is one that Kelsey calls "Publix Boy." It starts: "Have you ever wanted to do something but were just too afraid to ask?" Then, she relives a powerful, poignant and painful conversation between herself and Nathan, the coolest and cutest guy in school, when she asked him to be her date for homecoming.

With masterful delivery and perfect pauses, Kelsey ended with, "He said 'no.' It burned and stung like a scraped knee. I'll never forget Nathan. Publix Boy ruined my life (perfect pause) . . . for about 10 minutes."

The audience laughed aloud. Clearly, they could relate to Publix Boy and her other amusing and touching stories. Cline had a tear in her eye as she stood at the back of the room and watched Kelsey deliver the first of many powerful keynotes. It's obvious that Kelsey made a difference in many people's lives that day by asking them to: See Differently Try Differently. Live Differently.

### From Mentors Who Know Her

"No man is an island" is an expression that can be applied to speakers. In addition to Cline's coaching, Kelsey is grateful to NSA member Lou Heckler, CSP, CPAE, who has mentored her

since her days at University of Florida. He has helped her craft multiple keynotes, answered her business questions, and been a pillar of support.

Both Heckler and Gerety agree that Kelsey has been able to grow her business and become a more powerful speaker because of NSA's tools, resources and community. "All speakers realize this can be a lonely business, and I just tried to make her feel a little less lonely," Heckler says.

W Mitchell, CSP, CPAE, also observed a wonderful connection between Kelsey and her youth audiences. "When we first met, I sensed there was an undeveloped gift inside. And with the help of the consummate teacher, Lou Heckler, she has made the experience even more rewarding for the audience."

Heckler continues, "I think Kelsey embodies the best that each of us could be: determined, hopeful, positive in the face of physical challenges, and truly desirous of making a difference in the world. These are her strengths, both on and off the platform."

When people hear her story and see what she has overcome, they feel like saying, 'Well, I'm done complaining.' She is charming and unafraid. Her self-deprecating humor makes us comfortable with her, and her magnetism makes us love her."

With unlimited perseverance—she received her NSA professional membership at only 23 years old. It's no wonder Kelsey is making an impact and a difference in the lives of her audience members.

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*To learn more about Kelsey, please visit [www.KelseyTainsh.com](http://www.KelseyTainsh.com) or follow her on Twitter @KelseyTainsh.*



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