

This 2/05 interview with 2004-2005 NSA/NC chapter president Craig Harrison, was conducted by Milo Shapiro, *The Improv Guy*, an NSA leader from the San Diego chapter and editor of NSA's internal newsletter for chapter leaders. NSA.NC's website is [www.nsanc.org](http://www.nsanc.org).

**ThelImprovGuy:** Craig, welcome to *Winging It With Milo*. One of the biggest changes in the Northern California chapter was the elimination of your longtime apprentice program "Passport". What was the thought behind this change?

**CraigSpeaks:** Our previous apprentice program, Passport, allowed aspiring professionals access to NSA but yielded very few conversions to professional membership over the years. Despite its popularity (its rolls grew to outnumber general members) we weren't seeing the conversions.

**ThelImprovGuy:** Much like what we were experiencing in San Diego. But I understand that your board wasn't willing to cut them off completely. What replaced "Passport"?

**CraigSpeaks:** We replaced it with a comprehensive feeder program designed to yield more professional members by the program's completion, 11 months later. We call this program Pro-Track. The price is \$1500.

**ThelImprovGuy:** Yow! \$1500 and 11 months is a bigger commitment than a lot of apprentices would make.

**CraigSpeaks:** We believe a commitment of money and time is the best indicator our candidates are serious. Sure, we had 125 Passporters before but we're preferring to focus on the 25 who are close to taking the next step in the near term. We feel they are the ones who are ready and motivated to attend both general meetings and once-a-month PT meetings, get their 20 paid speeches, and join both National and our chapter.

**ThelImprovGuy:** Wow, so you were able to keep 20% of your apprentices with this new program in spite of the fee?

**CraigSpeaks:** Yup. And five have already qualified for national! It wasn't easy to keep our vow to discontinue the Passport program for our 125 passport holders. We offered Pro-Track without knowing how many would enroll, but ready to hold it for as many or few as enrolled. We got 25 *plus* some general members who wanted the more intensive training. And I know that some former Passporters *will* sign up next year.

**ThelImprovGuy:** Did all the Pro-Track students come from the Passport program?

**CraigSpeaks:** Some did. Others just heard about it without prior involvement with Passport and signed up because the program just sounded good to them.

**ThelImprovGuy:** So the Pro-Trackers are invited to your regular meetings as well...not just served separately.

**CraigSpeaks:** The Pro-Track cost *includes* registration at our 5 general membership meetings, so it's a total of 16 days a year, all on Saturdays. The Pro-Track program includes one day a month of programming with experts from our chapter and outside experts presenting. There is a showcase component, homework, teams formed, and more. We created a board position dedicated to champion emerging and aspiring speakers. Chapter Board director Shelley Lapkoff has built an incredibly nurturing community for our Pro-Track students that is the envy of general membership!

**ThelImprovGuy:** Any other big benefits in Pro-Track?

**CraigSpeaks:** Yes – a big one! Those qualifying for National are realizing a reduction in dues. They pay us only \$1000 and devote the rest of the money to their annual dues for national.

**ThelImprovGuy:** That is really brilliant because, since they've committed the \$1500 regardless, now it becomes a goal to get your money's WORTH...as compared to seeing more cost at the end.

**CraigSpeaks:** YES. Since the goal of the program was to build membership, we reduce their cost. And we get 16 opportunities to train a core group all about NSA culture, the business of speaking, etc. They learn as a

team, form friendships and partnerships. We are also cultivating future leaders from this highly motivated group. They are really jazzed and feel special. There's more about this program for other chapters to learn about at <http://nsanc.org/pro-track/>.

**TheImprovGuy:** **What was the final decision point for most PT sign ups?**

**CraigSpeaks:** OK...the beautiful name badges helped!

**TheImprovGuy:** **I knew it! The vanity factor!**

**CraigSpeaks:** Never underestimate those little things! For \$1500, you should get a nice badge! A past chapter president, CSP Michael Lee, worked with Shelley to recruit stellar talent and develop a detailed syllabus. I believe our "Class of 2005" was impressed by the scope of the content and challenged to step up by the dates and details we provided in the Fall. We expect a high rate of conversion based on their accountability to each other and synergy resulting from matriculating as a group. Our professional members see Pro-Trackers each meeting too and recognize them as the next crop of members.

**TheImprovGuy:** **When San Diego eliminated its apprentice program, we did so with kid gloves...very concerned about hurting our image of being supportive. Most took it fine. Was there any backlash from people who just couldn't afford the \$1500?**

**CraigSpeaks:** We spent so much time fearing a backlash and debating how to break the sad news that we were disbanding programs. Do we do it in letter form? From the platform? Should we have counselors standing by?

**TheImprovGuy:** **Same down here. That was a constant debate.**

**CraigSpeaks:** No kidding. But I was proud of our board's concern for its membership and apprentices. And after all that worry...it was well received. We did it with care and a sincere belief that it was for the best for the chapter and we'd leave no speaker behind...especially since non-members could come in perpetuity as Guests - though it costs a bit more. We extended Passport pricing until their "year's" passport expired naturally.

**TheImprovGuy:** **That's great! I'm sure other chapters in similar positions will be relieved to hear that!**

**CraigSpeaks:** I'm sure. I know it's nice when someone else tests the waters!

**TheImprovGuy:** **Let's move on to another topic. Last year, I heard about one or two chapters folding from lack of size and participation. That happened here in California with Sacramento this past year. When was that?**

**CraigSpeaks:** Over this past summer.

**TheImprovGuy:** **Tell me about NSA/NC's action on that front.**

**CraigSpeaks:** Sacramento is 90 miles north of us. Some of their members were also our members. Small chapters have trouble sustaining themselves.

**TheImprovGuy:** **So you were the closest possible chapter for them to connect with.**

**CraigSpeaks:** Yes, but we wanted to be more than that. We wanted them to really feel included. We made it as easy as we could for former Sac members to transition to us. We felt for them. In recognition of what they paid already, we discounted their membership to let them give us a try.

**TheImprovGuy:** **I'm sure it was a bittersweet change for the Sacramento folks.**

**CraigSpeaks:** Well, sometimes the dissolution of a chapter leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. We wanted to ameliorate that and let them know they could be a part of our family.

**TheImprovGuy:** **Ninety miles in such an urban area isn't a short hop. How are you helping them cope with that?**

**CraigSpeaks:** We will plan some events there to reach out to this under-represented region. One of our new board members is from Sacramento, which helps. We arrange inexpensive rooms at the host hotel available for out-of-town members and guests to encourage them to make a weekend of it. We also have a board dinner they can come to on Friday nights.

**TheImprovGuy:** **We still have two other topics; how about we save them for the next issue?**

**CraigSpeaks:** OK. "IM" you later!

**TheImprovGuy:** Tell me about the Northern California's "SIG"s. Are they kind of like PEGs?

**CraigSpeaks:** We wanted to enhance member benefits locally. We identified "birds of a feather" surrounding PUBLIC SEMINARS, WRITING, HUMOR and more. We formed two SIGS initially.

**TheImprovGuy:** Which two did you focus upon?

**CraigSpeaks:** One, for writers, is called "Writer's Bloc". It is led by a past chapter board member, Michael Larsen, a literary agent. They meet monthly and support each other's book ideas, discuss agents, titles, publishing options and more.

**TheImprovGuy:** And the other?

**CraigSpeaks:** It's called the "Public Seminars Forum". It's led by board member Jenny de St. Georges. They meet monthly in private homes to address all there is to know about public seminars. Next year we expect this group to produce our inaugural "PUBLIC SEMINAR ON PUBLIC SEMINARS" for the many non-members in banking, insurance, finance, and so many more fields.

**TheImprovGuy:** So it IS like PEGs but with more emphasis on *meeting* than on newsletters because of the close geography.

**CraigSpeaks:** YES, it's less about newsletters and more about small group gatherings but our SIGs *have* established a listserv, an e-list, and we upload many resources to help each other. We don't charge for it. It's done as potlucks and at host homes.

**TheImprovGuy:** What's the format of a SIG meeting? Is it like a mini-NSA Chapter meeting where someone presents while everyone takes notes? Or is it more of workshop set up?

**CraigSpeaks:** SIGs meet for several hours and their formats vary. Some cover a designated topic or 2 a month (meeting). Others involve problem solving, brainstorming, networking. It's up the group.

**TheImprovGuy:** Where can people learn about your SIGs?

**CraigSpeaks:** Check our site at [www.nsanc.org/sigs.html](http://www.nsanc.org/sigs.html)

**TheImprovGuy:** Topic three! You wanted to discuss partnering outside NSA.

**CraigSpeaks:** We've partnered with affiliated orgs such as ASTD, IMC, and the SF Writers Conference to offer member-rates for attending each other's meetings.

**TheImprovGuy:** What a cool idea! I spend a lot on visiting some groups at non-member rates. Were they concerned (especially ASTD) that this might reduce the incentive to be a member of both (like I am down here)?

**CraigSpeaks:** Most aligned orgs have members who come to both groups' meetings. We cross-promote their meetings and they promote ours. Not to the detriment to theirs. Some of our programs don't interest them. And vice versa. There are other benefits to full membership, so I guess they weren't worried.

**TheImprovGuy:** How about any partnering that builds speaking ability?

**CraigSpeaks:** Yes! We've also formed a partnership with an advanced specialty toastmasters group, Laugh Lovers. It's like our local humor PEG where NSAers can present and get coaching to add humor to their programs. It was built in honor of the late John Cantu, an NSAer who once managed the Holy City Zoo Comedy club where Robin Williams and Dana Carvey got their start.

**TheImprovGuy:** So Laugh Lovers was kind of like having a SIG all ready to go without you doing the work!

**CraigSpeaks:** YEP, Laugh Lovers was tailor made for us to partner with. John Cantu was a humor helper to Toastmasters too. The bridge was already in existence. We just added throughput! A lot of credit goes to our Marketing Director Tom Drews, who forged many partnerships with affiliate orgs in a short period of time. He reached out to chapters of IMC, ASTD, the Storytelling Assoc. of Alta California and is even pursuing the improv group Bay Area TheatreSports to establish reciprocal rates and cross-promotion of events.

**TheImprovGuy:** Wow – I didn't expect an improv connection! I've seen a lot of improv and Bay Area TheatreSports is probably the best. I managed San Diego TheatreSports for years and still play for them. (note to readers: there are great TS chapters all over the world...visit <webpage> for more info)

**TheImprovGuy:** **Last main topic for today: One thing I know from talking in Burbank with one of your board members is that NSA/NC is that you guys take retreats pretty seriously. Tell me about your board retreats.**

**CraigSpeaks:** They're a great way to kick off a year and transition, too. The hard part is getting everyone in the same place at the same time, speakers being as busy as they are. It helps to pick a place they WANT to come to. We prefer out of the city places we can relax and enjoy nature. There's so much to coordinate in any board year. We prefer to get started at an offsite where we can be free of day to day obligations and responsibilities.

**TheImprovGuy:** **What do you hope to accomplish there?**

**CraigSpeaks:** A lot! We can assess each other's styles of interaction, leadership, communication and learning. We can build friendships and trust before the going gets tough. We can create a shared vision for the year and create methods and systems for work flow. And most terrifying of all: We find out who has PCs and who has Macs!

**TheImprovGuy:** **Ooo...that's like the Jets and the Sharks in one room! Mac...Mac...Crazy Macs...think cool Mac!**

**CraigSpeaks:** (chuckle) We bond while suffering through gaseous vegetarian food and/or while roughing it. Imagine: professional speakers...without room service! Last year we invaded a Zen Center and were forced to learn to whisper a lot. They mostly turned into giggles.

**TheImprovGuy:** **So it sounds like your retreats are more geared for the incoming board than the existing one. Is it only the incoming board that attends?**

**CraigSpeaks:** There are always issues of continuity. With half the board turning over each year the retreat affords an ideal opportunity to transition. Since the president also changes each year, even returning board members have some adjusting to do. Sometimes they're the most recalcitrant!

**TheImprovGuy:** **I was recalcitrant for a while, but then I discovered Roloids.**

**CraigSpeaks:** Oh what a relief it is! Some years it's just the board at retreats. Other times we include key leaders (past or future). This adds value and helps the year's vision and changes get out quicker. In case other chapters are planning retreats, my handout on them is on the National "ChapOne" page at <http://www.nsaspeaker.org/chapters/intranet/burbankclc.shtml> or at <http://www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com/nsa.html>.

**TheImprovGuy:** **I think we've covered a lot. Two more quick questions. What is Craig's guilty TV pleasure?**

**CraigSpeaks:** It's got to be The Daily Show with Jon Stewart...although I pine for old episodes of "HOMICIDE-Life on the Streets". It was the *original* CSI !!!

**TheImprovGuy:** **And lastly, are you afraid of Instant Messaging any more?**

**CraigSpeaks:** Ha! Not after this endeavor! Technology is to be mastered, not feared. To paraphrase a famous mantra: "I.M. Somebody!" But I *can* see that my writing voice differs from my speaking one. I could have answered much more eloquently by phone but it's been a great experience to learn to do so in writing.

**TheImprovGuy:** As it has been hearing your words. But be warned Craig: I.M. is addictive! Let me teach you now how to log off...