

# THE she is

**BIG** personality, **BIG** hair & **BIG** jewelry lead to speaking success

BY BARBARA PARUS

## “A **cat** has **nine lives**”

is a familiar expression that alludes to a cat’s ability to survive and thrive under any circumstance. But those famous words do not apply to felines only, unless you notice a vague resemblance between a fluffy, white Persian outfitted in a jeweled collar and Mikki Williams, CSP.

Williams has been compared to Dolly Parton on steroids—you can’t help but notice her big hair, flashy jewelry and sparkling smile a mile away. Known for her flamboyant appearance, personal style, business savvy, and razor-sharp wit, Williams has had nine successful careers—and counting—in the business world.

Almost effortlessly, she made the jump from housewife and mother to dancer, choreographer, dance studio owner, a dance company, health club, and boutique store owner, caterer,

fitness instructor, natural products sales, meeting planner, life coach, and professional speaker. But, hold on, in addition to her speaking, she is a trainer, coach, consultant, author, radio and TV personality, and a serial entrepreneur.

Simply by being herself—her authentically outrageous self—Williams became her own brand before the word “branding” was a marketing term. Rather than fit in, Williams was born to stand out, and it has paid off well. She was chosen to appear on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* purely because she doesn’t look like other speakers.

In fact, Williams takes pride in her individuality while emphasizing, “Anyone can copy different, but no one can copy ‘unique.’ You must exploit your own uniqueness to stand out and be remembered.”

Williams says speakers can set themselves apart from the crowd in many ways;

# HER

for example, through their physical appearance, attire, attitude and message. The more outrageous, the better. In fact, she lives by her mantra: “Be outrageous. It’s the only place that isn’t crowded™.” Williams professes, “I’m authentically and flamboyantly me.”

She thrives on challenges and is always looking for her next

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professional conquest, as evident in the title of her new one-woman show, *She Came, She Wore, She Conquered: Shoes, Sex and Other Stories*. This queen of quips, whose trademark line is “Slip ‘em a Mikki,” infuses humor and one-liners into her transformational and thought-provoking stories that incite action in her audience members.

## **TRAGIC ENDINGS ... AND NEW BEGINNINGS**

All kidding aside, life wasn’t always sequins and rhinestones for Williams. In fact, she had no grand career aspirations when she was growing up as an only child in a single-parent household in New York. Williams’ goal was to be a housewife and mother, and she was living her dream with her husband, Gabe, and their two-year-old son, Jason, in a suburb in Connecticut. Life, for a short while, was absolutely perfect.

Then, she received three devastating blows within a three-month period. Williams lost the second child she was carrying, followed by her father-in-law’s death. While coping with these losses, Williams’ world completely imploded when



## SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR

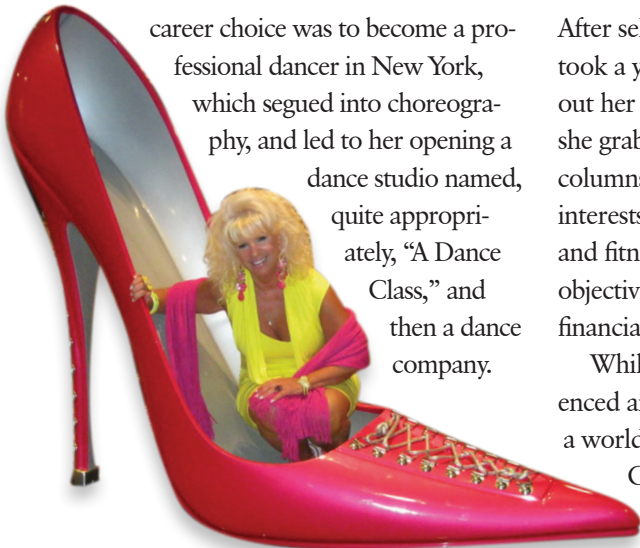
- ★ MIKKI WILLIAMS UNLTD a speaking, training and consulting firm.
- ★ COACHING, ETC... presentation skills, executive and life coaching enterprise.
- ★ Chair of peer advisory boards and a top tier speaker resource for VISTAGE INTERNATIONAL, the world's leading executive org.
- ★ SPEAKER SCHOOLS, held three times a year in Chicago.
- ★ MIKKI AND FRIENDS, a monthly tele-conversations series (this was listed twice, took one off).
- ★ A blog named MIKKI WILLIAMS' BLAH BLAH BLOG.
- ★ A subscription based membership, THE MIKKI MOUTH CLUB.
- ★ A product line, EXCESS-ORIES.
- ★ OUTRAGEOUS ORATORS...speakers who rock, an uncommon speakers bureau.

a police officer knocked on her door one evening, and handed over her husband's wallet and wedding ring. Gabe was killed in a tragic car accident while driving home from his job at IBM, leaving Williams to rear their young son alone. She was only 29.

Immediate financial pressures heightened the impact of her husband's sudden death. She had no job and no income, but lots of bills. When the going got tough, Williams got going—realizing she would need to call upon her natural talents to start earning an income quickly. She took a mental inventory of her strengths, talents, hobbies and interests.

Williams has always been passionate about dancing and cooking. In fact, she had attended Ithaca College in New York on a drama scholarship, but switched her major to physical education because it involved more dance. Her obvious

career choice was to become a professional dancer in New York, which segued into choreography, and led to her opening a dance studio named, quite appropriately, "A Dance Class," and then a dance company.



Among her most famous pupils were "Wicked" choreographer Wayne Cilento (one of the original cast members of "A Chorus Line"), actress Joanne Woodward, author Erica Jong and heiress Patty Heart.

For a time, Williams also danced on cruise ships, and booked talent—dancers, entertainers and speakers—for cruise lines through her business, cleverly titled "Sea-Ductive Adventures."

Concurrent with her dance enterprise, she launched a home catering business—The Happy Cooker—with Martha Stewart, who happened to be one of her dance students. They focused on gourmet catering and party planning, building successful businesses in Westport, Conn. As Williams says in her inimitable way, "She just went a little further than I did."

## PLANNING HER NEXT MOVE

After selling her last business in 1987, she took a year off to travel, reflect, and figure out her next career strategy. True to form, she grabbed a sheet of paper and drew two columns; on the left, she listed her talents, interests and hobbies (cooking, dancing and fitness). On the right, she listed her objectives (travel, glamour, people, no financial glass ceiling).

While analyzing her lists, she experienced an a-ha moment: She would open a world-class destination spa on the East Coast, similar to the ones that were enjoying success on the West

Coast. She went back to college to get a master's degree in hotel management and did some PR for hotels in the meantime. Instead, she ended up dropping the master's program in hotel management, and instead took a crash course in meeting planning at the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

She soon discovered that meeting planners worked behind the scenes sorting through details and logistics, and she knew inherently she did not possess a behind-the-scenes persona. But when she learned that meeting planners also book speakers, her curiosity was piqued. Heck, she didn't even know that speaking was a profession. That would be her new career direction.

"Speaking was very challenging in the beginning because my credibility was in fitness, the industry I was trying to leave," Williams says. "My keynote speech at Ernst & Young for *Inc.* magazine's entrepreneurial banquet launched my career. I was instructed to dress in my usual sequins and bring my Play-Doh, which I used as a prop, when I addressed an audience of 500 CEOs from Fortune 500 companies."

## TELL AND SHOW

Williams' multitude of businesses have served her well, supplying her with a wealth of information and experiences to draw from for her unique storytelling, whether the topic is sales and marketing, teamwork, communication skills, customer service, creativity, change management,





humor in the workplace, or wellness and motivation. With Williams, audiences don't get a canned speech and PowerPoint® presentation. Instead, she tailors each speech to the attendees and the industry, punctuates them with her own stories, and delights audiences with unique audio-visual aids, such as her signature Play-Doh, PIES cards, or customized goal band to make her programs memorable and fun.

Williams does her homework by researching each industry and client, pre-interviewing the attendees, using industry jargon and customizing each presentation to provide the most value. She makes it a point to arrive early to personally meet and greet attendees so she can incorporate their names and interesting information about them into her program to make it more relevant to the audience.

## DANCE AND FOOD FOR THOUGHT

In her Speaker Schools, Williams relies on her experiences in dancing and cooking to string anecdotes together that teach her attendees how to structure a speech.

"You choreograph a speech the same way you prepare a meal. Your appetizer is your opening, your salad ingredients are your objectives, your main course is the body of your speech and your smashing dessert is your close. You flavor the meal with salt and pepper by sprinkling in your quotes, humor, statistics and shtick," Williams says.

Not surprisingly, one of her signature speeches is "Speak Loudly and Carry a Big Shtick™." Not only does she make her point, she makes listeners hungry for more information.

## MAINTAINING A BUSINESS FOCUS

Despite her varied enterprises, Williams insists she is a businessperson, first and foremost, and a dancer, caterer or speaker second.

She extends this advice to other speakers and encourages them to establish products and services that feed one another. "You must be a businessperson to be successful in whatever you're doing. Get over the 'shiny object syndrome.' Create revenue streams that will endure," she says.

Williams co-authored a book on customer service; compiled a book of her favorite quotations called *Mikki Mouth: Quotations I Wish I'd Said and Some I Did Say!*; and produced DVDs, CDs and videos. She is finishing a book based on her life story, *We Interrupt This Life to Bring You: Life Lessons from an Outrageous Woman*. In fact, she has received offers to make her inspirational life story into a TV movie and a feature film. But, perhaps one of her most proud accomplishments was being chosen as one of the best speakers by *Meetings and Convention Magazine* (July 2010 issue), along with Zig Ziglar, CSP, CPAE, Tony Robbins, Bill Gates, Rudy Giuliani, Colin Powell and other notables.

## NETWORKING NETS VALUABLE CONTACTS

Where does she get her energy? Perhaps being born on the Fourth of July, combined with a positive, can-do attitude, explains this firecracker's drive. Williams celebrates her 25th anniversary as an NSA member this year, and thanks to her top-notch networking skills, she has traveled all over the world and met top government officials. She has spoken on every continent except Antarctica, at President Nelson Mandela's home in South Africa after apartheid, and twice at the White House.

"I spoke at the White House under President Bush and under President Clinton," says Williams. "My audiences always laughed when I said I spoke 'under Clinton,' so I carefully reworded that phrase."

For Williams, networking is a natural talent and a way of life. She encourages other speakers to keep networking to create new business opportunities and maintain relationships. "If that doesn't work," she says, "Just 'Slip 'em a Mikki.'"



Barbara Parus is Speaker magazine editor in chief. She admires chutzpah and couldn't get the tune "Hey, Mikki" out of her head while writing this story.

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