



Some of the SPOC E-board [L-R]: Dave Reed, Katrina Rideout, Saul Meisler, John Sheridan, and Sean Prager.

Is willpower enough to bring Douglas Adams to Clark?

By Zack Ordynans

Just for the sake of this article, what if we said that a student group was trying to bring an extremely famous, well respected author to Clark to speak during Parents Weekend about one of his recent books, a book that happens to be used in a class here, and the school showed very little interest in helping the student group, financially or otherwise? Well, what if the student organization was SPOC (Science-fiction People Of Clark), a group with an annual budget that is roughly equal to the amount of money that MassPIRG spends on photocopying flyers each year (\$642), and they are trying to bring Douglas Adams— author of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, among other books you've heard of— to Clark, and he gets a speaking fee in the range of \$20,000 plus expenses (including a round-trip, first class flight to his home in London)? Is there any way that SPOC— an organization previously content with showing videos in Grind Central— could ever manage to make this event happen?

Before we answer that question, let's go back to the beginning. Saul Meisler, SPOC E-board member, first mentioned the idea of bringing Douglas Adams to Clark at a September SPOC meeting. The new SPOC E-board (only two of whom were even in the organization the previous year, and none who were in the previous E-board) was excited by the idea but unsure about how to proceed.

According to E-board member Dave Reed, “we had no idea how much it would cost, or if it was even possible, but we knew it would be an extremely popular event and we wanted to do it really badly. Besides, we had nothing better to do.” Possibly because they had nothing to lose, they had the confidence to attempt what many would have considered impossible.

SPOC’s next step was speaking to Professor Thurlow of the Chemistry department, who possessed Adams’ Email address. Sean Prager, technical director of ROCU and a SPOC member, sent Adams an email asking about his American booking agency.

Prager called GTN (Greater Talent Network, Adams’ agency) in early October and was told that Adams’ usual speaking fee is \$20,000 plus expenses (airfare, hotel, etc.). However, because this was a college audience, GTN said that Adams may speak for as little as \$15,000.

“My immediate response was, ‘Damn, we could probably do that!’” said Reed. “But we had to get going and start working on raising the money.”

SPOC initially contacted the Biology, Chemistry, and English Departments, who were supportive but could not afford to contribute money to the cause. They also asked The President’s Office for a contribution, but according to Reed, “Jack Foley called me and said that The President’s Office doesn’t contribute money to this sort of event. He also said that they thought it was a waste of money to pay someone that much just to come speak.”

After that setback, SPOC began to seek out co-sponsorship from other student organizations. Speakers Forum was the first organization that they turned to.

Speaker’s Forum and SAB

Reed was one of the three SPOC members who presented the idea at a Speakers Forum meeting. “When I mentioned Douglas Adams, their eyes went wide and their jaws dropped. They were amazed at what we were trying to do.”

Jonathan Messenger of Speakers Forum said of the event that, “[Adams] would be one of the most recognizable speakers to come to Clark in a long time, and it is the responsibility of any large planning group to recognize important events like this and to bring them to this campus.”

Mike Coles, of Speakers Forum, agrees. “I like the fact that we can co-sponsor events like this, especially with small organizations like SPOC.” After just one Speakers Forum meeting, SPOC was given \$5,000 to pursue this project. SPOC was also told that they should approach Speakers Forum again if they continue to have problems raising money.

After this first taste of success, SPOC was hungry for more. Next in line was Student Activities Board (SAB), which was not as receptive to the idea as Speakers Forum. Reed presented the event to five members of SAB at a meeting held on the Sunday before Thanksgiving break. SAB said they would get back to him. After break, Reed spoke to Nichole Mercier of SAB and was told that SAB had voted to give SPOC \$1,000.

“I thought it was a bit low,” Reed said of

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SAB’s contribution. “I was hoping for a bit more, considering that SAB is the best funded organization on this campus.” SAB’s budget is \$50,000— almost 80 times SPOC’s budget.

Mercier defended SAB’s contribution. “This is the first year that we’ve co-sponsored at all, and we’re trying to be fair to all of the organizations that have come to us, spreading out the money that we’ve given out. We’ve co-sponsored with a lot of organizations this year, including MassPIRG, PEC, Speakers Forum, Hillel, and other groups.”

Messenger questioned SAB’s low offer. “What would you rather have come to Clark— a pseudo-“Singled Out” event or a best-selling author who rarely appears in

America?”

At the time of this interview, a Smash Mouth song was playing in the background. “Isn’t SAB trying to get Smash Mouth?” asked Coles.

“I think they should get their priorities straight,” answered Messenger.

onward and forward

Winter break was the next obstacle in SPOC’s path. At this point, SPOC had only managed to raise about \$6,600, but in Reed’s words, they “were more determined than ever.” Over break, several SPOC members considered driving to New York to bargain with GTN in person. They were confident that they would be able to raise another \$4,000, and were prepared to offer \$10,000 to GTN. When a GTN representative told Reed that Adams would probably accept an offer of \$12,000, SPOC decided to wait until after break to see if they can raise more money before sending GTN a binding offer.

SPOC originally planned the event for April 18, an admitted students open house day. The day was chosen because SPOC hoped that it would convince Admissions to donate money. Shortly after break, GTN told Reed that Adams would be in the U.S. in early April, lowering his expenses substantially if the date could be changed. Considering that Admissions had already declined to support the event, SPOC instantly agreed to move the event up to April 6.

On January 26, SPOC again approached Speakers Forum. After a long discussion, SPOC was granted another \$2,000, bringing the total to \$8,600. By this time, the Visual and Performing Arts Department had agreed to waive all of their fees for using Atwood, and with the reduction in Adams’ expenses, SPOC began to feel like the event was within reach.

a personal sacrifice

Dave Reed explains his strategy. “I decided that if this was going to happen, it would have to happen through sheer determination.” Determination, in this case included using his own money to help fund the event. Reed first considered putting his money behind his organization when SAB failed to donate as much as he would have

hoped. Since then, the amount of his personal contribution has increased dramatically.

Why would Reed spend an amount of money so great that his parents would disown him if they ever heard an accurate dollar amount (hence the discretion here)? “I want to prove that an event like this can actually happen at Clark. If I have to make a sacrifice to do that, I’m willing.” Reed paused, and then continued. “Plus, how cool would it be if he spoke here?”

And what do other people think about this? “They think I’m insane, but they’re not arguing. Linda Brown Connors found out recently, and I explained it to her, but I don’t think she likes it very much. She was very surprised.”

irresistible forces and immovable objects

After the second meeting with Speakers Forum and Reed’s personal donation, and accounting for money that they expected to still receive from other sources (including admission to the event itself), SPOC had enough to make a reasonable offer*. Reed faxed the bid to GTN on February 3. When they called back and asked about the faculty sponsor, Reed told GTN to call Connors. GTN then spoke to Connors, who until then had been unaware of how far SPOC had taken this ambitious goal. After some investigation and a discussion with Reed, she approved the bid and it was officially submitted to GTN.

Meanwhile, the date changed again. Apparently Adams will be in Boston in late March with a couple of free days, so the event was moved to March 30.

This was assuming, of course, that Adams would accept the bid. Three stressful weeks later, Adams finally responded on February 26. He agreed to come to Clark, but only if he could speak during the day on Saturday, April 4.

Naturally the members of SPOC were ecstatic, but now they had another problem. Reed, who was aware that there are 8 plays going up this semester (including “The Circle”, a play that Reed wrote), and that the CUPS play would be going up in Atwood in the beginning of April, feared that Atwood was already booked on the fourth. Luckily, it turned out that the CUPS show would be going on at night on the

fourth, and SPOC could use Atwood for the speech, which will start at 2 PM.

lessons

It all worked out this time, but should it have been this difficult? Bill Evans and Randy Mack faced a similar struggle last year when they attempted to bring a debate between P.J. O’Rourke and Michael Moore, and moderated by Andy Richter, to Clark. Before Adams accepted SPOC’s bid, Evans advised Reed and SPOC to give up on trying to host any major events at Clark.

“Nobody wants to help Clark students do events at this University. The administration should step in and help— they tell us what we can’t do but show no interest in enriching our experience,” Evans said. “It’s no surprise that people leave this school.”

Reed expects less from Clark. “The administration should help, but I know that they’re not going to, so I decided to make a sacrifice.”

Evans was upset that Reed’s donation was necessary. “I think that’s stupid. We have a \$300,000 Student Activities budget. No student should ever have to use their own money. It’s bad enough that they have to use their own time. It may not always be realistic to have any group think that they can do whatever they want, bring any band or speaker here, but any event that students feel this strongly about should happen. Especially when you think about how weak most events are [at Clark].”

Another problem that SPOC and Evans both encountered was the lack of an adequate space to hold major events.

“Without a usable balcony, Atwood isn’t really big enough for events that are open to the Clark community,” said Sean Prager.

“Atwood is somewhere between run down and falling apart, but unfortunately it’s the only place that a student organization can book for this type of event,” commented Meisler. “There’s no effective venue for an event this size on this cam-

pus.”

Evans agreed. “Atwood would have been way too small. I didn’t want to pay for an event like this out of the SAF and then have to turn students away because there aren’t enough seats. I was going to use the gym, but we would have had to put down a floor, rent chairs, rent, design, and install a sound and light system, hire athletic staff and police officers— the cost of using the gym was estimated at around \$3,000. Also, it’s a terrible venue. The sound is awful. And the room is flat; people wouldn’t be able to see anything.”

The debate that Evans had been working on ultimately did not happen at Clark because there was a volleyball tournament in the gym that was scheduled to end four to five hours before the debate would have begun. Evans believed that

this would be enough time to set up the event (the stage would have already been ready in an unused corner of the gym), but Dean Darrigrand and Physical Plant head Paul Bottis disagreed with Evans and decided that the event could

not happen in the gym that night. Evans is currently working on booking the event at WPI in the fall.

So what has Reed learned from this experience? “It’s taught me that regardless of what anyone says, it is possible to do things here, but you need to rely on sheer willpower.”

And if he had proved to be unsuccessful? “Next time I’d have to try harder.”

For now, Dave Reed and SPOC can be content in the knowledge that they managed to attract the biggest event that Clark has seen in years (based on cost, if not name recognition). And if it means that the organization may need to postpone a couple of movie nights, then that’s all right. •

* Shortly before this issue was set to go to press, SPOC received \$500 from Programming Council.

