

Finding My Own True Voice: Kevin Hancock



As president of Hancock Lumber Company, Kevin Hancock leads a sixth-generation family business that has operated since 1848. Headquartered in Casco, Maine, the company has 10 retail stores and three sawmills, and employs 430 people. The company also owns and manages 12,000 acres of timberland in Cumberland and Oxford counties. Kevin lives with his wife, Alison, and daughters, Abby and Sydney, in Casco, ME.

I have had adductor spasmodic dysphonia since 2010. I acquired the disorder at the peak of the housing and mortgage markets' economic collapse. That period put a lot of pressure on our company. It was a pretty stressful time for me. I felt a lot of responsibility to protect "my tribe." I think this is what triggered the disorder. I was 44 years old at the time. When I think back, my throat began getting tight

while I was speaking. I originally thought I had a cold, but it persisted for months. Soon, without realizing it, I began tipping my chin down toward my chest when I spoke as if I was instinctively protecting the area.

By then, everyone was asking me what was wrong. Others noticed before I did, which I find interesting in hindsight. It took about nine months from the time I realized something was wrong to the time I was diagnosed. It got a bit scary because initially no one could really figure out what was wrong. The specialist I saw in Portland, Maine thought I just needed some speech therapy. When my condition continued to get worse, I ended up at Massachusetts Eye and Ear in Boston where Dr. Song diagnosed me. I had never heard of SD at the time, and had never met anyone who had the disorder.

In regard to treatment, I take periodic, small doses of Botox® every 3-4 months. I also take a half dose of omeprazole daily. Most importantly, I have spent a lot of time with two speech therapists, Deborah Pelletier in Maine and Connie Pike in Florida. I believe in a holistic approach to this disorder. It has prompted me to do a good bit of introspective thinking and soul searching. I spend much more time now doing things that serve my soul than I did before I acquired SD. In this way, SD has actually been a blessing. It forced me to slow down and think more

deeply about who I was. SD makes you listen; that's its hidden blessing.

SD has only had a subtle impact on my family life—all positive. It has made me, as the Dad, just a little bit less the center of attention. I listen to my family more; we all share the stage. With my career, SD has had a massive impact—also for the better. At first it was very scary. I couldn't imagine how I would help run a company without the consistent, comfortable use of my voice. After a year or two, however, I began to see the opportunity. The opportunity was to use SD as a catalyst to make everyone else's voice in our company stronger. We have 430 employees spread out across 10 stores and 3 sawmills. Traditionally, I was the company leader who hustled around to be the 'voice' of the organization. Suddenly, I couldn't really do that anymore. "So, what if everyone became the voice of the company?" I eventually thought to myself.

An organization where everyone leads and feels heard would be much more powerful than one in which just a few people hold all the power. This was the organizational blessing of acquiring SD. I came to see the business as a place where everyone could have a voice. Subtle changes in thinking can have a big impact, and this small idea has changed our whole company. Slowing down, listening to my own soul, and doing things that come from my heart. Spasmodic dysphonia helped me learn to live a little bit less with my head and a little bit more with my heart.

How do you explain spasmodic dysphonia to others? I tell people that when I go to speak, I feel like I am being strangled. I just run out of air after a single sentence or two sometimes. If I push through this, I get a dizzy, buzzing sensation all along the top of my head (like I am not getting enough air). When my SD is at its worst it makes me not want to speak very much because it takes such a physical effort to do so.

What is the primary challenge of living with SD? The primary challenge is also the primary blessing—it is learning to hold back...learning to do less, not more. Doing less can be very powerful, even more productive than doing more. You become much more strategic in your actions, in where you choose to invest your voice. We have been taught that doing more is being more productive, but that's not actually true. Being busy and being successful are two different things entirely. I am not sure I would have learned this without SD.

What advice would you give someone newly diagnosed with spasmodic dysphonia? First, find peers who also have the disorder and get connected with them. You will quickly learn you are not alone. The NSDA is a great way to do this. Second, find quiet time where you can just reflect and listen to the whispers of your own soul. This is the hidden blessing of SD—we are given a chance to quiet down and hear the whispers.

Kevin recently authored the book, *“Not for Sale: Finding Center in the Land of Crazy Horse”* which is his memoir that traces his journey deep into Indian country, and even deeper into his own soul. He shared with us some insights on this project and how it impacted his journey with spasmodic dysphonia.

What was your motivation for writing the book, *Not for Sale: Finding Center in the Land of Crazy Horse*?

In the fall of 2012, once our company had clearly worked through the economic challenges of the time, I decided to do something to serve myself in a more substantial way. I have always loved American history and the American west. I was particularly fascinated with the 2nd half of the 19th century when America’s Manifest Destiny ran into the Plains Indians. I read so much about the subject that I became a bit of an informal expert.

This got me wondering what modern-day life was like on the reservations that were created back in the 1860’s and 70’s. So, I decided to go visit one. I chose the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. It is one of the biggest, most remote, most disenfranchised, and most historic reservations in America. At the time, it was just designed to be a one-time trip. I had no understanding of the journey that was about to unfold. But, thanks to my SD, I was listening. Once I got there I was able to hear the whispers. The place really spoke to me in a powerful way.

I ended up falling in love with the people, the landscape, and their story. I was keeping a journal and when I got back on the plane and looked at everything I had written, I realized I was going to tell a story. Their story and my story. I have since been back eight times, started a non-profit, and written a book about my experiences there.

I now understand that I went to Pine Ridge to ‘find my voice’, both literally and spiritually. It was a place where nobody really knew me or needed anything from me. It was a place where I could be silent and serve myself. I found it so ironic that I went to ‘find my voice’ in a community that felt like it had no voice. The people who live there often feel forgotten and marginalized.

Out of this ‘modern day vision-quest experience’, I came to see a calling to strengthen the voices of others—strengthening voices in a disenfranchised community like Pine Ridge; strengthening voices in a modern day business environment like Hancock Lumber; strengthening the voices of our own souls in a 24/7, internet-wired world that constantly seems to be asking for bigger, better, more.

It took losing my voice to find my voice. I find that so ironic today. It makes me smile.

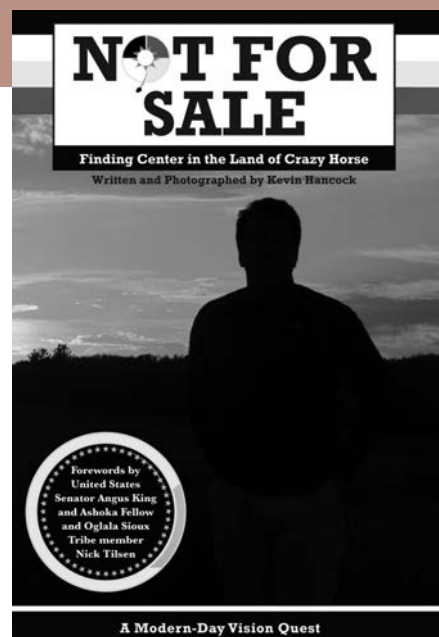
So, that’s what my book is about—it’s about strengthening voices and working toward a world in which every individual feels heard and valued. It’s easier said than done, but just walking that path is powerful. It has changed a lot of things for me.

Can you talk about being able to express yourself through writing and photography?

Writing the book was very therapeutic for me. Simply put, my throat doesn’t hurt when I write. In writing and photography I am able to express myself fully and completely. I never have to cut myself short. Furthermore, the book I wrote is deeply personal. It chronicles my travels to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation over a three-year period, shortly after I acquired SD. At the time, I was searching for my voice. I was searching for both a path to regain strength in my outer, speaking voice as well as a path to deeper connectivity with my inner voice—the essence of who I am. I believe both voices are connected and SD patients have a unique opportunity to make that connection due to the manner in which the disorder provides a chance to stop, think, and listen.

How has the time at Pine Ridge affected your view on life? On living with spasmodic dysphonia?

My time at Pine Ridge has allowed me to see the benefits of having SD. It’s still a ‘pain in the neck’ at many times, but the overall



impact of acquiring SD, for me, has been positive and powerful. I have learned to listen. I have learned to serve myself more. I have heard a calling to help strengthen the voices of others.

Can you talk about finding your own true voice?

My book explores the notion that we are all here on this earth seeking our own true voice. We all come from a tribe and that tribe pulls on us to act in certain ways. At the same time, each soul is here to individuate—to find its true callings—and, that is only possible when we transcend the busyness and momentum of our own tribes to listen to what our souls are saying. SD is an invitation to listen. It took me quite a few years to realize this, and I doubt I ever would have learned this lesson without SD. So, this is why I have come to see SD as a blessing, not a curse. In this way, my book is about the spiritual side of SD, which is really about the spiritual side of being human. Having written the book, I am excited to share the story with the larger SD community. We are not as isolated as we think and there are blessings hidden in the disorder.

Read more about Kevin’s journey and obtain his book on-line at <http://kevinhancock.com>