



[Comments](#) 0 | [Recommend](#) 0

Talk may not be cheap, but it can be inspirational

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, April 11, 2010

This time last year, [Gail Davis](#) was sweating bullets.

She'd recently moved her speakers bureau into more spacious digs in Colleyville and added staff. But the call for speakers was down considerably.

"Business gurus kept saying that a downturn is the time to grow. It seemed so counterintuitive," says the 52-year-old president of Gail Davis & Associates Inc. "But we decided to use our downtime to build new relationships, and now that's paying off."

CLICK IMAGE TO ENLARGE



LAWRENCE

JENKINS/Special

Contributor

[Ron White](#) of Fort Worth, the reigning national memory champ, is one of Gail Davis' most popular speakers. For \$7,500, he teaches audiences tricks to remembering names, numbers and product information.

Davis' company has booked more speaking gigs for more money in 2010 than it did last year in total. These 163 engagements will bring in \$2.2 million in company revenue. And unless full brakes are unexpectedly applied, 2010 should be the best in the agency's 11-year history. An additional 45 engagements are already contracted for 2011.

"In the down economy, some people thought of a speaker as an extra," she says. "Now they realize a good speaker pulls an event together."

Many want speakers pronto.

Last week, a meeting planner hired the agency's top headliner, Nando Parrado, for an event in Miami that's less than two weeks away. Parrado, who talks about surviving the 1972 plane crash in the Andes Mountains, is a \$60,000 inspiration.

"That does include his first-class airfare from [Montevideo](#), Uruguay," Davis says to soften the sticker shock. She gets 20 percent of his fees, so it's no wonder she loves this guy.

Last fall, the agency cold-called Ken Owen, who handles a lecture series at [DePauw University](#) in Greencastle, Ind. So when his speaker for the March 15 event fell through in January, Owen called the agency seeking a hasty fill-in. He was offered Academy Award nominee [Jason Reitman](#), director of *Up in the Air*.

"Jason came eight days after the [Oscars](#) and was terrific on every level," Owen says. "He went to a dinner, and

the students were in awe. He went from table to table and worked the room. To see their facial expressions was priceless."

Owen says dealing with the Davis bureau was a joy compared to other experiences. "Some negotiations for speakers are like the Mideast peace talks. This was so smooth."

Davis has 2,300 speakers in her database, but her bureau runs on about 200 mainstays.

Nando Parrado has been her keystone keynoter since 1999, when she took a buyout at [Electronic Data Systems Corp.](#) to start her bureau.

"Often when I bring up his name, the person will go, 'Wait a minute. Isn't that the story where they ate each other?' Yes, that is the story, but if that's what he talked about, who'd want to hire him?" Davis says.

Event planners want speakers with unique perspectives on common issues, she says.

"I tell people, 'There's not going to be one person in the audience who's survived a plane crash at cruising altitude. Pretty much guarantee it. Not going to be anyone in the audience who's been stuck on a mountain for 72 days. Probably not going to be anyone who's done a 10-day trek from 18,000 feet. But I can assure you, everyone will relate to this guy, because as Nando says, 'We all have our own Andes.' "

She and Parrado met while she was at EDS.

As manager of the corporate incentive events department, Davis set up the annual gathering of top EDS sales performers held in posh places with fabulous speakers.

In 1994, Les Alberthal handed her a mission impossible: Find a headliner with international appeal and a dynamite message whom no one had heard.

By happenstance, Davis rented the movie *Alive* and watched it one night at home. Parrado's tale of courage and marshaling fellow survivors gave her the wild idea of hiring him for the big event.

She called 10 speakers bureaus. All told her she was nuts. This was pre-[Google](#), pre-Web, and no one even knew how to contact him.

Through a strange sequence, she tracked down Parrado in Montevideo. She sent him a copy of Ross Perot's *On Wings of Eagles* along with an EDS annual report, hoping to show Parrado that the company was worth the effort.

"Nando loved the book and wanted to meet Ross Perot," she says. "We were in a lawsuit with Perot, so this was not the angle I was hoping for."

So she dangled a four-day vacation with his wife at the Ritz Carlton on Maui, where the meeting was being held, and an honorarium of \$40,000 for his virgin speaking engagement.

"He gets on stage and knocks it out of the ballpark."

Although Parrado was among her most in-demand speakers last year, she survived the downturn by having others more moderately priced. Like Parrado, they tend to have offbeat business messages.

A current hot property is Fort Worth's Ron White, the reigning national memory champ. For \$7,500, he teaches audiences tricks for remembering people's names, numbers and product information.

Before a speaking engagement, White mingles with the audience, casually introducing himself. Once on stage, he asks those he's met to stand. As he repeats their names, they have to sit down.

"He drops them like dominoes," says Davis. Davis is also on a roll with David Houle, "the CEO futurist." He has a pretty good track record in forecasting the economy.

Then there's The Passing Zone, two guys in tights who juggle chainsaws and Garden Weasels. It's a metaphor for how people juggle their workday with life's demands. It's also a testament to the importance of teamwork when you *really* don't want to make mistakes.

Kristina Wandzilak, executive director of Full Circle Intervention, is also in demand – especially with family-owned businesses.

"It's bad enough when your CEO is doing cocaine," says Davis. "But when your CEO is also your brother-in-law, that's not good. She has taken off like wildfire."