

Hail to the Heroes by James Davis

1 There are many great sporting events in the world and there are many great athletes, but no sporting event nor athlete better exemplifies the definition of courage, determination, and stamina than the Tour de France bicycle race and its magnificent racers.

2 Over a 2,400-mile course through the French countryside they race. Across endless flatlands and over demoralizing mountains they endure—nay, they conquer. To win the race outright is no more than a pipe dream for all but a select few. The real victory is to finish the race. It becomes not a competition against the other racers, but a competition against one's self. The capacity to transcend relentless pain is an earmark of any great athlete, but the racers of the Tour de France deserve special credit.

3 Courage—the quality of being brave. They show me this. Prim and trim, dressed in racing tights that reflect a kaleidoscope of colors, they gather at the starting line. But the flash and glimmer of the starting line is fleeting. At the sound of the gun, the battle begins, and as in all battles, there will be casualties. I remember one racer who suffered a broken nose and still continued. I've heard of many a racer who had dinner-plate sized patches of flesh torn away by sixty-mile-per-hour crashes and still continued. I recall another racer who suffered a broken arm and had a team doctor set it on the spot so he could continue. For courage like that, I say hail to the heroes.

4 Determination—a firm intention. They show me this. Only by failing to finish the race, say the bikers, is one truly defeated. So with this in mind, they grit their teeth and pedal on. Through blinding downpours, they wipe their glasses dry and pedal on. Suffering from freezing cold on mountain tops and sweltering heat in valleys, they pedal on. Enduring the voice within that cries for rest and relief, they pedal on. Suffering from agonizing backaches and a never-ending barrage of leg cramps, they pedal on. For determination like that, I say hail to the heroes.

5 Stamina—staunch resistance to fatigue. They show me this. For twenty-two days they race. Each day brings a new level of exhaustion that must be endured and overcome. When watching the bikers go by, one can almost read their facial expressions: "I want to stop, but I can't. Push, push, push." "My chest is exploding, I can hardly breathe, but I can't stop. Push, push, push." "One more climb. I can't make it. Yes, I can. Push, push, push." For this special brand of stamina, I say hail to the heroes.

6 In the morning light I often climb aboard my own bike. I push myself up hills and race down the other side. But not like they do. I pace myself on flatlands and straight-aways. But not like they do. I have courage, determination, and stamina. But not like they do. So during the Tour de France, I climb off my bike and become one in a throng and watch them as they pedal by and silently say to myself, hail to the heroes.

Sample Special Occasion Speeches

My Grandfather by Kim Lacina

1 Every day people are born and people die. Human beings come into this world and leave it—most without their names being immortalized in any history books. Millions of people have lived and worked and loved and died without making any great claims to fame or fortune.

2 But they aren't forgotten—not by their friends, not by their families. And some of these people, some very special people, are not forgotten even by those who hardly knew them. My grandfather was one of these very special people.

3 What made him so special? Why is he remembered not only by friends and family but even by casual acquaintances? Very simply, because he was the essence of love. More than that, he was the essence of what I think of as “active” love. Just as his heart was not empty, his words were not empty.

4 He didn't just speak of compassion. During the Great Depression he took homeless people off the street into his home when they needed a place to sleep. He gave them food when they needed something to eat. And though he wasn't a rich man by any means, he gave them money when they had none. Those people off the street will remember the man who had enough love in his heart to share with them all that he had.

5 He didn't just speak of tolerance. During the 1960s, when his peers were condemning those “long-haired hippies,” I can remember riding in the car with my grandfather, picking up dozens and dozens of those “long-haired hippies” who were hitchhiking, and going miles out of our way to give them a ride somewhere. Those men and women will remember the man who had enough love in his heart to bridge the gap between his world and theirs and to practice the spirit of brotherhood.

6 And he didn't just speak of courage. He proved his courage time and time again. He proved it to a little girl who was trapped in the basement of a burning building. He pulled her out of the flames and gave her back her life. And that little girl, now a grown woman, will remember the man who had enough love in his heart to risk his life for a person he didn't even know.

7 He also proved his courage, in a more personal way, to his family. In 1966 he was told he had leukemia and only a year to live. He immediately started chemotherapy treatment, and I don't know which is worse—the effects of the disease or the effects of those treatments. In the ensuing year we saw his hair fall out, we saw his skin turn a pasty shade of gray, and we saw him lose so much weight that he seemed to shrivel up into half the size he had been. We didn't want to see him go out that way.

8 And we didn't. He fought that disease with all his strength and all his courage. And despite the pain he endured, he never complained. I think about him when I catch myself complaining about my “tons of homework” or a “terrible headache,” and suddenly that homework or that headache doesn't seem so terrible after all.

9 He lived through that first year, and he lived through eight more. And that disease never stopped him from working, and it never stopped him from caring. All through those years of suffering, he continued to show compassion and tolerance and courage.

10 He died in 1975. And though he left this world without ever making the pages of a history book, he still left the world a great deal. He left to the people who knew him a spirit to exemplify life—a spirit of unconditional, selfless, and truly inspiring love.

Sample Special Occasion Speeches

The Survivors by Andrea Besikoff

1 “Work! Harder. Faster. Shovel! Don’t just stand there. Shovel!”

2 And so he shoveled with all of his energy and all of his might. Hour after hour, he shoveled until his body could not shovel any more. Finally, he stopped working, leaned over on his shovel, and let his body limply rest, as his eyes stared at the ground.

3 The commander looked his way and hollered in a low and penetrating voice, “Shovel!” But the man did not move. The commander lifted his gun, loaded it with ammunition, and shot him. The man released his hands from the shovel and fell to the ground. He murmured his last words, “How could this happen?” The Nazi walked over, lifted his heel, and kicked the man into the mass grave, which he had been digging.

4 One more Jew was removed from this world. He was one of 6 million who was brought to his death by the Nazi policy to annihilate the Jewish race. The Nazis collected the Jews in the ghettos; they transported the Jews to the death camps; they worked the Jews until they could not work any more. Then they killed them—by gun and by gas, by starvation and sickness, by torture and terror.

5 Millions of Jews died in the death camps of Dachau, Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and Treblinka. It seems unfathomable that people could have survived the Nazis’ wartime atrocities. Yet, by the grace of God, there were survivors. The survivors were the young and the strong, not the old and the meek. The survivors were the lucky and the few.

6 My grandparents are Holocaust survivors. They are each the only survivors in their families. They witnessed the deaths of their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, friends and neighbors. They witnessed the destruction of their lives and homes, towns and country, shops and synagogues. They lived through the ghettos. They lived through the death camps. They lived through the excruciating work. They lived to see liberation.

7 Since I was a little girl, my grandparents have told me about their lives during the Holocaust. They have told me about the persecution, the intolerance, and the injustice so that I could appreciate my freedom, my liberty, and my independence. It has always amazed me that my grandparents don’t have spite or malice. After all they suffered, they have only hope and love. They don’t want to hate any more.

8 During World War II, my grandparents were victims of anti-Semitism. Fifty years later, they are victims no longer. Today they fight against the “isms” which plague our communities, our states, our nation, and our world. They tell their story so that we, the younger generation, will understand the horrific force which anti-Semitism was in their lives. They relate their experiences to the struggles which so many people grapple with today. They will tell their story, and they will not rest until all people can live without fear and without denial—until all people can live with pride and with dignity.

9 And when my grandparents are gone, I will continue to tell their story. I will tell my children about the men and women who were murdered for no cause. I will tell my children about the heroism of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto who fought strength for strength against the Nazi militia. I will tell these stories to all who will listen.

10 And I hope that you, too, will tell stories. As the Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel, once said, “Not to transmit an experience is to betray it.”

11 To the millions who died in the Holocaust, lie peacefully in your graves, for you have not been forgotten.