

Author Nicholas Sparks Tells His Own Story

It was a packed house when bestselling author Nicholas Sparks took to the stage of Benchmark's A. Palmer West Performing Arts Center on November 7th. "An Evening With Nicholas Sparks" was presented through the generosity of Al, Lorelee, and their son, Benchmark alumnus Palmer West '85 who initiated the West Family Speaker Series four years ago. The event was free, open to the public, and gave over 400 Nicholas Sparks fans from across the Delaware Valley a rare and often humorous look into the author's life and the inspiration behind many of his books.

Sparks noted that his passion in high school and college was track and field. He trained every day, broke a relay record that still stands at the University of Notre Dame, and had an eye on the Olympics until he was hurt his freshman year. "I went home for the summer and couldn't run," Sparks explained. "I was moping around the house and my mother got tired of it. She said, 'Nick don't just pout, *do something!*' I asked her what I should do and she replied, 'I don't know. Go write a book.' So I did." In six weeks he produced a 314-page horror novel that he claims was simply awful. From that experience, however, he learned that he could write a novel and that he enjoyed the writing process.

After college, Sparks waited tables, wrote a mystery novel, appraised real estate, bought and sold homes, sold



Presenting sponsor Lorelee West meets Author Nicholas Sparks before his presentation. The evening was made possible through the generosity of Lorelee, Al West, and their son Palmer West '85.

dental products by phone, started and failed in two businesses, and eventually became a pharmaceutical salesperson. By the time he was 28, he was a husband and a father and he felt that he wasn't chasing dreams anymore. He needed a passion. He decided to write again and this time give it 100 percent.

Sparks had a story he could tell inspired by his wife's maternal grandparents; how they met and fell in love, and how their love for one another endured for 60 years. He wrote the novel in six months, contacted literary agents and quickly found one

who read the manuscript and thought it was going to be "big." A few days later, he received a call that there was a \$1 million offer for *The Notebook!*

Nicholas Sparks recounted that most of his books have been inspired by family. For example, the inspiration for *A Message in a Bottle* was his father's handling of his mother's death, and the story of *A Walk to Remember* is based on his sister, her husband, and their journey through her battling cancer.

Sparks is the author of 18 bestsellers including *Nights in Rodanthe*, *The Guardian*, *Dear John*, *The Best of Me*, and *Safe Haven*, to name a few. His latest book, *The Longest Ride*, was released last fall. There have been eight film adaptations of Spark's novels.

What draws readers to his books? At the end of the evening at Benchmark, Nicholas Sparks told the audience quite simply, "I try to tell you a story that will you remember. To me what makes a great story is where the characters interest you and their voices interest you. You are so caught up in the book that you can't put it down. And when you do close it, you remember it for a long time."

It is Nicholas Sparks' personal story; one of struggle, rejection, and triumph, that pulled in the audience at Benchmark and made it an evening to remember.

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Photos by Jim Roese Photography