

Dancing under the stars with elephants at the IABC Africa gala dinner

 By Leigh Andrews

8 Nov 2016

It was a night of celebrating SA's top communicators as well as a night of firsts - stomping across the dance floor to silent disco beats, anyone? That's just one way we acknowledged the 'elephants in the room', along with the first starry constellation of IABC Africa Silver Quill winners...

“ @IABCAfrica #IABCAfrica16 Gala dinner #FairyGodmother. #GoldQuill; #SilverQuill awards recognising top-notch biz communicators @silentevents pic.twitter.com/cY8EzOAovs— GrammarGuyBFN (@eugene_seegers) [November 3, 2016](#) ”

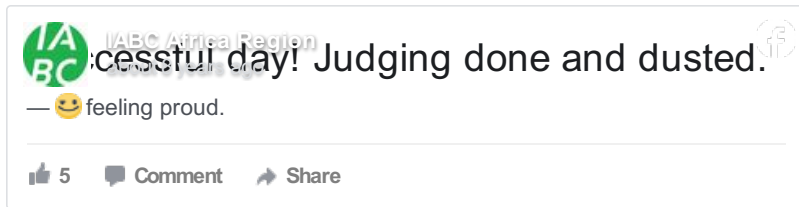
Fairy godmother [Donna McCallum](#) fluttered her wings and welcomed attendees to the Vineyard Hotel's warmly decorated ballroom while thanking the awards' sponsors, saying she felt a little daunted to be among such excellent communicators at the International Association of Business Communicators event' and cryptically asked us to 'unleash our inner elephants'. More on that later.

Host for the evening Mari Lee, the 2015 IABC Gold Quill Chair Africa, stated that communications is a special field with the power to shift, transform and make magic. She explained that the night would be all about authentic communication and the need to connect with emotion, which is often the real elephant in the room. The business risks underpinned by that emotional connection (or lack thereof) are another elephant to consider. Her development communication agency DevCom has found that the business risks of emotional communication are often underpinned by human behaviour – that's the real elephant in the room. Lee then encouraged us to “Take the elephants by the hand, dance with them and eat them bit by bit.”

Acknowledging the elephant(s) in the room

On the topic of eating, attendees were treated to a gravlax, peppered and cold-smoked salmon starter served with crisp wonton basket salad and tangy Asian dressing, after which the first winners of the night were announced.

We heard that the international IABC Gold Quills are treated as the Oscars in communication, with entrants required to provide case studies that detail the challenges faced as well as measurable impact and results. There were over 500 entries this year with 90 winners in total, of which three were South African. Adding to our accolades, South Africa also had one of the biggest blue-ribbon evaluation panels for the global awards, with our volunteers going over 200 entries.



[Carol Allers](#), current chair of IABC Africa and former IABC Africa chair and current [international executive board member](#) Daniel Munslow handed over these Gold Quill awards. The first went to Chantalle Schutte for her work on The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa's One AFM Game Plan. The second went to Lovemore Nalube from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology or CPUT for Live Video Streaming of the 2014 Graduation Ceremonies, with an excellence award handed to André Oberholzer, group head of corporate affairs at Sappi SA.

Munslow also announced the volunteer of the year award, which fell over both Munslow and Allers' periods as chair. Allers said Ghrethna Kruger was selected based on a number of factors such as her motivation in driving the awards over the past two years by heading up the Quills portfolio and also serving as a mentor for those wanting to enter the Silver and Gold Quills alike.

Celebrating excellent communicators, silent disco style

Shifting focus from global gold to local silver, we were told that the matriarch is the leader of the elephant herd and it was time to release all our inner elephants in celebration, silent disco style to the [Cha cha slide](#) – Mississippi Stomp version, thank you very much!



Silent disco - elephant stomp style. Image © Maryka Ludik

On experiencing her first silent disco, Dianne Chase, 2016/2017 Chair of the global IABC's IEB stated: "There's nothing like us, there never will be and thank you," adding that IABC membership led to professional relationships that last throughout a lifetime.

Merit winners in the IABC Africa Silver Quill awards, launched this year, were then announced. Mooketsi Mocumi took one for their entry to reposition the Anglo American brand and another for their Makarapa City communication plan. Anglo American subsidiary Kumba Iron Ore's Janine Botes also won a silver merit award, as did the Barclays Africa technology team's Sophia Dower for the *Right Stuff* overnight edition, which is published pop-up style. This was followed by mains of

roast leg of lamb, beautifully accompanied by roast onion and sage dauphinoise potatoes, gem squash purée, beetroot cubes, lamb jus and salsa verde. As flavourful as it was colourful, this was a good time to take our inner elephants for a walk, joining the herds sitting at tables flagged in the colour of the elephants on the name tags we had selected on entry.

Coming out tops for the Silver Quill communication excellence awards were Zelda Schwalbach from Sappi SA, with the outcome goal 100% met and actively improving communication with communities, as well as the Anglo team for their exhibition stand at Lovedale Primary School. Another went to Ann Farndell of the Anglo team for their employee indebtedness programme. Sappi SA's Oberholzer was also awarded for their social mobilisation programme. On to special awards for the night, Lee was called on stage in recognition of the *Ten years of the Devcom way* book. Oberholzer then returned to the stage on behalf of Elsabe Coetzee for their environmental management communication. Sophia Dower was called to the stage in recognition of Barclays Africa group's TechTalks, with another award for 'technology back on track'. Munslow then announced the 'best of the best' award, presented to Dower. We trumpeted loudly and stomped our hooves in applause as we heard this well-deserved milestone would be recognised with a ticket to the IABC's world conference in Washington in June 2017. Conversation swelled around the room on noticing the balloons above our multi-coloured elephant tables were black, white and blue – the colours of Botswana. Fitting as the country celebrates its 50th year of independence, said Munslow. He added that victory is sweet, as was dessert.



Colours of Botswana. Image © Maryka Ludik

Excellence Award and Lifetime Achiever revealed...

Now feeling part of our new elephant tribes – we're excellent communicators, after all – we slowly made our way through delicate vanilla cake towers served with macarons, cranberry compote and cream-filled choux pastries. The final awards were then handed out. First, to a captain of industry and outstanding communications with a distinct style that resonates with both broad groups and real-time announcements. "It's easy to communicate well when times are good, not so easy when times are tough, especially with internal and external stakeholders." The growth of social media has given so many ways to do so, with the prestigious Excellence Award 2016 presented by Munslow to non-IABC member, Sappi SA CEO Alex Thiel. He was chosen for his commitment to communication and personal involvement in the business strategy, driving profitability through the business stakeholders' communication. He also kept stakeholders engaged, as they're critical for success in times of crisis as well as in driving engagement like with the SAPPI Earth sustainability game and youth empowerment programme that also won on the night. "All-round excellence is key," explained Munslow. Lee was also given a token of appreciation for putting the night together in celebration of the best of the best, in a time where leaders are being called on to demonstrate tireless leadership communication.

The last announcement of the night was a special award of recognition – the lifetime achievement award, given to a business communicator who has done exceptional work over their career. It's given to an IABC member whose efforts have enhanced the IABC image and career. With 30 years' experience and local and international recognition, as well as

dedicating ample time to charity, Munslow presented the award to current IABC Africa chair, Allers.



Dancing with elephants. Image © Maryka Ludik

We ended the evening with strong coffee served in tiny espresso cups, then flailed our trunks and stomped into the night as we continued the silent disco. Remember the [Macarena](#), anyone? Of course you do. Those moves from over two decades ago are implanted in our collective memory. Now the event invite makes sense: *“Once upon a time, there were elephants in a room, dancing silently under the spell of a Fairy Godmother. They were in awe of those amongst them that picked up the Quill and wrote their name among the stars...”*

Consider our inner elephants unleashed. A wonderful way to celebrate local communication winners!

[Click here](#) for a gallery of images from the night.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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