Bomb Shelter Negotiation Exercise

The Facts: World War III has just broken out, and nuclear bombs are destroying cities across the globe. People are heading for whatever fall-out they can find. Unfortunately, all but one shelter in a 600-mile radius have been destroyed. Only one shelter in this area is safe, and is equipped to sustain live for 12-18 months—long enough for the effects of the nuclear weapons to dissipate. Sadly this one shelter can only hold FOUR people. There is no way to get to another shelter (600 miles away) before being exposed to a lethal dose of radiation.

A special defense committee stationed in Salt Lake has been notified of the shelter dilemma and must decide which four people should be allowed in the bomb shelter. The committee has interviewed all the survivors and has narrowed the choice down to ten exceptional people. Now the judges from the committee must hold a forum with the ten finalists and decide which four will be escorted to the shelter.

Each of you will play the role of one of the finalists or judges. You will have 1½ minute to argue why you should be chosen to live in the shelter. During your speeches, the judges may ask questions to help them make their decision. The judges will deliberate for five minutes and then decide, by secret ballot, which four people will enter the shelter.

Remember, the four people chosen to stay in the shelter will be left to start the human race over again. As a finalist, consider how best you can contribute to humanity. Also consider the possible weaknesses of the other finalists and the advantages/disadvantages of choosing each finalist.

Finalists:

Bookkeeper—31-year-old male

Bookkeeper’s wife—six months pregnant

Black militant—2nd year medical student

Famous Historian/author—42 years old

Hollywood star, singer, dancer—25 years old

Biochemist—Nobel Prize winner, 50 years old

Rabbi—55 years old

College dropout—architect, male

Olympic athlete—plays any sport, female

Policeman with gun (they cannot be separated)

What does this minimal information reveal about personality types, skills, talents, contributions to community, values, goals, etc.?
This is an old classic, customized for our area, culture and a class of 20 students, but you can always add more judges. I use this exercise when we are talking about persuasive writing, as we are discussing the proposal assignment (chapter 8 of Technical Communication Today). It can be seen as bigger group version of the elevator pitch (p. 223). It takes 35-60 minutes, depending on how many questions are asked.

It works best if you form a circle or rectangle out of the desks so each person can be seen.

1. I hand out the first page and ask students to take a minute to read it.
2. I print and slice the above titles and have the students draw them from a bowl.
3. I give the finalists 5 minutes to turn their page over and brainstorm their elevator pitch about why they should be allowed in the shelter. I encourage them to carefully consider their audience (chapter 2) and “PiP” their candidacy argument—sandwiching persuasion, information, and persuasion. They can add to their descriptions, but cannot change anything (like their sex, age, etc.). I ask the judges to use this time to think through the scenario, make a tentative list of the four candidates (to see if they change their minds) and formulate important questions for the finalists. I also like to distribute treats like popsicles, bubblegum, or suckers—something to keep everyone quiet when it’s not their turn to speak.
4. We go around the circle and each finalist has 90 seconds to plead their case (use a timer). I encourage judges to take notes. Then we go around the circle again and each judge can ask one question of any finalist. You can circle around with questions one more time if necessary.
5. We excuse the finalists to take a bathroom/drink break and wait in the hall while judges discuss for 5 minutes. After discussion we cast votes with closed ballot.
6. We invite everyone in and tally the votes
7. After the final four shelter candidates are announced, we discuss the results, the rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos and logos used, and the arguments effectiveness. We also talk about the ethical responsibilities of the judges and how personal and social ethics can impact decisions (chapter 4).