

Positive reinforcement for art of public speaking

Toastmaster meetings prove educational

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Effective communication skills are a key element of the workplace. If you weren't born with the gift of gab, how do you learn to conquer your fears and relate to an audience? You could join the club focused on helping regular people become comfortable and competent speakers, the Toastmasters.

Toastmasters International was founded in 1924 as a way for people to come together and help each other develop public speaking skills in a friendly, structured environment. Over the years, club members have included politicians, corporate CEOs and celebrities. They have nearly 226,000 members in 11,500 clubs in 92 countries. Local chapters conduct their hour meetings weekly. The Research Park Toastmasters, club 4838, has been gathering for 21 years. Members meet on Wednesdays at the Army Corps of Engineers building just off University Drive in Huntsville.

Each meeting follows a set format. After opening remarks and an introduction of any guests, previously designated club members deliver their speeches. The subject matter and length vary. Each per-



Photo by Kelley Lane-Sivley

LISTEN UP— Toastmaster members evaluate Tim Vander Veer's speech in an effort to improve his skills.

son progresses through the different formats and time lengths based on their comfort and skill level. Toastmaster manuals help guide them through the progression.

"Each manual has 10 different types of learning objectives for us to focus on," member Joe Hidalgo said.

While club members speak, the rest evaluate how they are doing. A grammarian listens for language flubs and stumbles. A timer keeps track of length, warning the speaker with color-coded cards as they approach their time limit. Each member takes a turn at these and other positions during the meetings. By learning to

listen to others carefully, they learn to hear themselves as well.

"It's a chance for us to learn from each other," Hidalgo said. "We take turns with the various responsibilities. We know before we come to the meeting what those responsibilities are."

The criticism speakers receive is gentle. The idea is to build confidence in what they are doing right while bringing their attention to the areas they need more work on.

"In doing our evaluations we must remember the rule of positive reinforcement," Hidalgo said. "But also try to find things that they can improve on so that they can benefit and improve. Sometimes it's hard."

In addition to the prepared speeches, the club also helps its members learn to speak on the fly. Every meeting a member introduces impromptu topics. Members either volunteer or are chosen to stand and speak briefly about them.

"Often as Toastmasters we have to respond off the cuff," Hidalgo explained. "It's a way for us to practice our impromptu skills."

The topics, and the corresponding answers, are frequently funny. When asked what his advice to newlyweds would be for a successful marriage, David Little had the other members rolling in the aisles.

"Fight naked," he quipped.

Each meeting comes to a close with a secret ballot style vote for best speaker of the day, best evaluator and best impromptu. Ribbons are presented for the awards of the day, another part of reinforcing a

skill well done.

In addition to the basic skills of grammar and timing, the club seeks to enrich the quality of its speakers by expanding their vocabularies. Each week members are introduced to a new word and are encouraged to work it into their vernacular, both in the day's meeting and in their lives.

The Research Park Toastmasters is among a handful of clubs in the Huntsville area. All welcomed their district leaders and local dignitaries to their annual spring conference at the University Drive Holiday Inn, held over the weekend. The two-day event focused on educational workshop sessions geared at making club members the best communicators they can be through body language, writing and effective storytelling. The conference culminated in the International Speech Contest and banquet Saturday night.

Before the conference, each club held its own speech competition. The winners then proceeded on to the district level at the conference banquet. Winners have a chance at making it all the way to an event billed as the world championship of public speaking, the Toastmasters International Convention, held this year in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, Aug. 13-16. Competition at even the district level is lively, Hidalgo said.

"Typically one of the highlights is the international speech competition at the banquet. The winner goes forward to represent district 77 at the next level, which is national and then go on to international," he said. "They're very dynamic speakers."