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Toastmasters International growing strong and adapting to a changing world

By Susan Todd/The Star-Ledger
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TIM FARRELL/THE STAR-LEDGER

Princeton Toastmasters club president, George Philip, sets up a video camera at a recent Toastmasters meeting.

Jim Rafferty did not look comfortable.

Standing before an audience during a recent meeting of the Princeton Toastmasters Club, his hands trembled and he paused a few times as if trying to remember the sequence of his words.

Once, he took a quick look at his notes and then resumed speaking. A few more minutes into his presentation, the loud musical ring tone of a cellphone started blaring. The audience's attention swung like a laser from Rafferty to a dark-haired woman fumbling frantically to squelch the blaring sound.

Unruffled, Rafferty continued talking over the clamor about how the internet was hurting the U.S. economy.

For the Toastmasters, this was practice, a routine meeting where everyone is trying to improve. In the basement of the United Methodist Church in Princeton, Rafferty was just one more public speaker in the making.

In an age when people keep in touch on Facebook walls, when text messages written in zany shorthand take the place of conversations and business executives deliver speeches by webcast, the whole idea of a group dedicated to public speaking skills seems a bit anachronistic.

But after 85 years of existence, Toastmasters is still growing and adapting. Membership nationwide has increased steadily since 2006. This year, the number of members jumped to 150,280, up 6 percent over 2008. Members today are just as likely to use Microsoft's PowerPoint program as they are to use a podium.

On the night Rafferty made speech No. 2 — the equivalent of training wheels in the overall Toastmasters program — a handful of first-timers were sitting among the club's regular crowd of working professionals, many of whom are new Americans. Arthur Tippin, one of the newcomers to the club, is 24.

Gary Schmidt, the Oregon-based president of Toastmasters International, said Toastmasters has endured because there is an appreciation for public speaking that transcends profession, age or background.

"Communication skills never go out of style," he said. "They continue to be essential."

Rafferty, a 52-year-old unemployed Wall Street equities trader, said he was constantly frustrated by his inability to express himself in group discussions.

"Even though I had lots of ideas, I had a very difficult time speaking up in a conference room," he said.

Now, he's determined to get over the discomfort. "I don't feel as smooth as some of the others," he said when the meeting ended, "but I'm confident I'll get there."

There were examples all around him of people who had overcome nervous gestures, sweaty palms and monotone speaking voices. Sapna Agrawal, a stay-at-home mom from West Windsor, was one of them.

Agrawal, who joined the Princeton club five years ago, looked poised, moved effortlessly through her speech and added some drama to her story by using a simple postcard prop.

"I'm much more comfortable and confident," she said afterward in English still accented by her native India. "This has helped me to express myself."

Most Toastmaster clubs — there are 12,500 of them around the world — meet once a week or several times a month. The recent meeting in Princeton provided a glimpse of the club's structure: Everyone had an assignment and nearly everyone had a chance to make a presentation.

Some members were evaluators for the night, giving them the job of critiquing Rafferty and other members making speeches. One member timed every presentation. Another, Clara Ramirez, had the task of counting every "ah" uttered during the course of the meeting.

Toastmasters is conducted in much the same way it was back in 1924 when Ralph Smedley started the group in the basement of a YMCA in California. The majority of every meeting is devoted to speaking practice and peer feedback.

The feedback is expected to be friendly — and forthright. Leonie Infantry, Rafferty's evaluator, suggested that he begin using index cards instead of a page of notes. And if he is interrupted by a cellphone again, Infantry advised him to pause and wait for the clamor to end. "The audience is distracted, so why compete," she said.

According to Schmidt, the average member remains active in Toastmasters for 18 months, but some will stay for five years or more. Ten speeches — everyone sets their own pace — earns a member the title of "Competent Communicator." The rankings increase as the member becomes more accomplished.

Lisa Snyder, a self-employed insurance consultant in her 40s, has belonged to a Toastmasters Club in Lawrenceville for the past four years. As president of a Mercer County businesswoman's group, she said she had plenty of public-speaking opportunities.

"I was torturing people with my presentation skills," she said. "I was just reading information I wanted to convey."

Snyder said she has developed skills that go beyond public speaking for business.

"It's really about communicating," she said.

TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL

Founder: Ralph Smedley

In the beginning: Smedley started Toastmasters in a California-based YMCA in 1924, creating a training format that mimicked a social club meeting. The intent was to give young men training in public speaking and presiding over meetings.

Milestones: Membership was open to women in 1973; Toastmasters reached 100,000 members in 1982.

How far its come: Today, there are 250,000 members and 12,000 clubs in 106 countries.

New Jersey presence: 165 clubs. Major companies, such as Chubb, Medco Health, Toys "R" Us and Merck, have their own clubs.

Some famous members: Tim Allen, actor; Peter Coors, chairman of Molson Coors Brewing Co.; Chris Matthews, NBC and MSNBC news host.

Big time: Next year, Tumbleweed Entertainment will release "Speakeasy," a feature-length documentary that explores the 2008 World Championship of Public Speaking and the wider world of Toastmasters.

Summing it up: *"The unprepared speaker has a right to be afraid."* — Ralph Smedley

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