

Toastmasters helps conquer Americans' No. 1 fear

By JOY JUEDES, Staff Writer

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REDLANDS - Many people have come and gone in Redlands' two Toastmasters clubs, and many have stayed for many years. Their stories have similar beginnings - and endings.

"I literally changed my major from English at UCLA, I was so afraid of public speaking," said Corliss Serber, a Yucaipa resident and member of the Redlands Community Toastmasters Club for nine years.

"I cried my eyes out to my adviser - can we switch? That was the level of fear. Many people come to Toastmasters with that kind of fear."

Serber, now a retired public school teacher, has spoken at San Andreas High School's commencement and mentored students and new club members in the art of public speaking.

"I can tell you, my students, 95 percent were scared of getting up in front of a room and ended up loving it," said Serber, whose late husband, Ron, was also involved in Toastmasters. The club named an award in his honor.

Grace LeFevre, a Redlands real estate agent and member of Koffee `n' Toastmasters in Redlands, has been involved with Toastmasters for almost 20 years. She walked into her first meeting with no clue what Toastmasters was.

"I had no idea if this group prepared toasts," she said. "I was just so supported and so encouraged - it changed my life and I'm still there."

She said it is a pleasant meeting to walk into without knowing anyone.

"Some people ask, 'What is Toastmasters?' and the answer we love to give is, 'We don't make toasters,'" said Joan Marie Patsky, a Beaumont resident who joined Koffee `n' Toastmasters in September at LeFevre's encouragement.

LeFevre said the group develops communication and leadership skills.

"I've used it quite a bit in my personal and professional life," Serber said. She said many join to be better interviewers and interviewees.

"It teaches you poise, complements your professional background and social ability to communicate with others in everyday living," Patsky said.

LeFevre said she has made lifelong friends through Toastmasters.

"It's just a group that melds so strongly. You remain friends," she said.

Lynn Wolden, president of Redlands Community Toastmasters, also had a fear of public speaking reaching back to high school.

"But I knew had to - it's was one of those life skills I had to have," said Wolden, a Redlands resident and pilot for United Airlines.

When she was laid off in January 2004, "I dashed right over to Redlands Community Toastmasters and joined," she said. "I kept doing Toastmasters because it's a good skill to have, so when I'm out in life I can go up and speak without hesitation."

And it keeps her prepared.

"My big thing is I had to get over the hurdle of being afraid - my mouth would get dry," she said. "I need to keep practicing."

Past president Michael Waddington went to his first meeting 10 years ago in Rancho Cucamonga.

"I went to two meetings and it scared the bejesus out of me," he said.

He then went to meetings in Redlands.

"The first three months, I couldn't stand it but I did it anyway," he said.

He said it was difficult to speak in front of his subordinates, even though he knew all of them.

"It gradually became easier and easier. It's just changed my life, really - made it much easier to communicate with groups of people."

He left the club after his tenure as president and came back.

"People who started the journey were up there speaking and comfortable," he said. "It's a wonderful transformation to observe in other people."

Jack Nelson, district governor and member of Koffee `n' Toastmasters, said that is his favorite thing about Toastmasters.

"A lot of people come in afraid to even stand up and introduce themselves," he said. "You see the growth."

LeFevre said at a typical club meeting, there are 15 to 20 people and scheduled speeches. The meeting and speeches are structured to conform to a manual. There are evaluations and suggestions, and also impromptu topics called "table talk."

"You don't know what the topic is and have to talk off the cuff," Serber said.

"You can be as creative and outrageous as you want, go outside the box," said Wolden, who has used her Toastmasters experience at science conferences, where she has presented research for the U.S. Forest Service, where she works part time.

Nelson said evaluations are also an important aspect of meetings.

"(It's) one of the best things we don't advertise," he said. "You have to listen carefully."

The clubs are preparing for fall speech contests, called tall tales. Club winners are sent to area and then division meetings.

The speakers bureau, which LeFevre helps run, meets monthly at the Jerry L. Pettis VA Memorial Hospital in Loma Linda. Members can work their way up in rank.

"I decided it was time to go back to Toastmasters because I wanted to polish my public speaking skills to become a member of the speakers' bureau," said Patsky, who first joined Toastmasters in the 1980s.

She is at the advanced bronze level and working on silver.

"It's a pretty cool goal," she said.

Like Serber, she first joined because she was terrified of public speaking in college classes.

"I stuttered - I was so nervous I thought I'd faint - I was that afraid," she said. "I knew there would be other verbal presentations."

Serber also joined because it was one of her goals after she and her husband joined a personal growth class.

"It was about setting goals and that's what Toastmasters is about," she said.

She and many of her fellow members are still in the club.

"There's a nucleus of people who have stayed," she said. "You can have an affiliation wherever you are."

"Most people come in for the speaking and stay for the camaraderie," said Nelson, who is also a member of the Yucaipa club.

Serber and others said most people leave a meeting with the same thoughts.

"Everyone who comes to visit says the same thing - how supportive everyone is, non-threatening," she said.

Newcomers are seated next to someone who can answer their questions and are mentored by a veteran club member. Mentoring is extended to schools, which is what Serber's then-principal at San Andreas, Margaret Hill, asked her to do.

Toastmasters International started in 1924 at the YMCA in Santa Ana. Next year, the international conference will be at the Marriott in Palm Desert.

"We are hosting the world," LeFevre said.

Information

Koffee `n' Toastmasters meets 7 to 8:30 a.m. Wednesdays at Braswell's Chateau Villa, 620 E. Highland Ave.

Redlands Community Toastmasters Club meets 5:30 p.m. Thursdays at First Lutheran Church of Redlands, 1207 W. Cypress Ave.

For more information on the organization, visit www.toastmasters.org

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