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A unique forum for public speaking

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Robert McGhee had a flip chart of numbers to his right, a pristine new Toastmasters International banner to his left, and an audience of homeless men in front of him, leaning forward and ready to listen.

A homeless shelter may be an unlikely place to launch into a defense of President Bush's tax cuts, but McGhee, undeterred, waded in with enthusiasm.

When he was finished, the group applauded him with equal gusto.

"I'm the only Republican here," he joked afterward.

"Here" was Clifton Sanctuary Ministries, a men's shelter in the Lake Claire neighborhood that on Sunday became what may be the first homeless shelter in the country with its own Toastmasters chapter.

"We don't keep records that way," said Suzanne Frey, a Toastmasters spokeswoman at the group's headquarters in Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif. "But I've never heard of anything like that, and I've been here 20 years."

Toastmasters International is a nonprofit organization that encourages public speaking. Founded in 1924, it has nearly 220,000 members in 11,300 clubs in 90 countries.

"We see lots of clubs in churches, but never in shelters," said Tonya Smith, Toastmasters Division I governor overseeing 31 clubs in metro Atlanta. She was on hand to help run Sunday's chartering ceremony of Clifton Club No. 1102834.

Members of Toastmasters have been working with the group since October, helping them hone their speaking techniques.

"It's a way to build confidence, a way to present yourself to an employer," said Keith Pinder, 27, who's been staying at the shelter for five weeks.

Dressed in khakis, Oxford button-down shirt, argyle sweater vest and wire-rimmed glasses, Pinder gave a speech about love, quoting 1 Corinthians from the Bible several times. He recently started a new job as a telemarketer and is saving for an apartment.

McGhee and Pinder admitted to plenty of nerves before they got up before an audience of peers and volunteers who showed up Sunday for the ceremony.

In Toastmasters, the first speech is called an ice breaker; the speaker talks about his or her life.

"It's been very inspiring to see them be so courageous," Smith said, "to get up and share their stories in front of everybody, about how their lives got off track and what they've done to get back."

The training "helps you organize and present your thoughts in a clear and thoughtful manner," said Robert Muller, who had been in a Toastmasters club before becoming homeless. "And it's nice 'cause it's hard to hear good English these days, the way it was meant to be spoken."

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