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Join Toastmasters and learn to talk the talk in timely fashion

By Laura Van Wert
TRIBUNE-REVIEW NEWS SERVICE
Thursday, January 21, 2010

Buzz up!

When James Green gave a presentation in front of hundreds of potential investors in California more than a year ago, he flopped. Crashed and burned, he said.

Luckily, a member of the audience was part of Toastmasters International, a nonprofit that teaches its members how to speak, listen and think better.

"I sold real estate, so I thought I'm a pretty good communicator. My brother was there and he was like, 'What happened to you?' I just kind of froze up," Green said. "Once you have to do it, it's a big difference."

Fast-forward a year and a half. Green is part of a local Toastmasters group comprised of three other members and Diana Hopfinger, the District 13 Division A governor for Toastmasters International.

The group, which dubbed itself PB&J (short for Pleasant Hills, Baldwin and Jefferson Hills), bubbles with excitement when speaking about the Toastmasters meetings. The group, which formed in the fall, needs at least 20 members to gain a charter and qualify for more supplies and perks.

"The more people who come out here, the better," Hopfinger said. "There are Toastmasters clubs all over the world."

Vance Kochenderfer of Castle Shannon served as the emcee for this month's meeting.

"I help tie all the parts together, keep them moving along, and also get to introduce our speakers," Kochenderfer said.

Kochenderfer joined the group because he gave presentations at work and wanted to be able to engage an audience more, he said.

"I realized I could work a lot better at not boring people," Kochenderfer said. The rest of the group laughed and agreed.

Hopfinger was the only person assigned to deliver a speech at last Wednesday's meeting. Her assignment was to speak for about five to seven minutes to entertain the audience. She told the story of how her family practiced the Italian Christmas Eve tradition of cooking seven fishes.

"A lot of people think an entertaining speech has to be laughter, and it doesn't," said Green, who was the speech evaluator for meeting. "It can be a dramatic story."

The story of how Hopfinger and her husband went to Wholey's Fish Market in the Strip District to buy the seafood captivated everyone. Hopfinger spoke slowly but strong, and made eye contact with each person. Highlights of her story included her use of description and timed humor at the end of phrases -- a Toastmasters key tip for using humor.

"It's hard to get up in front of people and be funny," Hopfinger said.

Hopfinger is in charge of 16 clubs, from Morgantown, W.Va., to Robinson and White Oak. She meets and works with all of the members, she said.

There are dozens of Toastmasters clubs around the Pittsburgh area. They are both private business clubs where only employees of a company may join and public community clubs, such as PB&J.

Bruce Tenenbaum of Whitehall served as the table topics master for the evening. The table topics master asks each person an impromptu question, and that person must speak about that topic for one to two minutes. The point is to help the members improve their extemporaneous speaking skills.

Last week's subject was 2010 and New Year's resolutions.

Answers ranged from helping children through college searches and calling loved ones, to past trips to London and a husband and wife recalling daily how they are blessed. The members expressed not only the ability to communicate with one another, but the ability to understand and identify with what each person had to say.

Each speech is evaluated at the end of the meeting, so members know both their strengths and weaknesses.

"Getting the evaluation is the most important part," Green said.

Length is important because speakers need to know when to stop. Each person stayed mostly within the time allotted, but Hopfinger surpassed his limit by speaking nine minutes.

"The most important part in giving speeches is knowing when to stop," Kochenderfer said.

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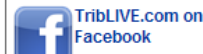
Practice makes perfect
Laura Van Wert/Tribune-Review News Service

To get involved

The Pleasant Hills, Baldwin and Jefferson Hills Toastmasters' group meets the first and third Wednesday of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. in the Southland Shopping Center's Panera Bread, Pleasant Hills.

Dues are \$35 per member and are paid twice a year. For more information, visit www.d13tm.com.

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