

Toastmasters International Turns 85

The nonprofit best known for public speaking has benefited more than 4 million people through improved communication and leadership skills that bolster personal and professional growth

Eighty-five years ago today, Dr. Ralph C. Smedley held the first official Toastmasters meeting in the basement of a YMCA in Santa Ana, Calif. Not even Dr. Smedley could have envisioned the history he was making on that day. The organization that started as a small group of people dedicated to teaching after-dinner speeches to young men has evolved into a worldwide leader in communication and leadership development. Since that first meeting in 1924, more than 4 million people have benefited from the Toastmasters experience.

(Photo: <http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20091022/DC96965>)

"Toastmasters' long-term success and growth is a tribute to Dr. Smedley's vision," says Toastmasters International President Gary A. Schmidt. "He understood that communication isn't optional and leadership isn't always innate, but both can be learned through doing." Today, Toastmasters' 250,000-plus active members participate in over 12,500 clubs spanning 108 countries. From Dubai to New Zealand, Saskatchewan to Connecticut, each day thousands of Toastmasters participate in meetings to learn and practice valuable communication and leadership skills in a supportive environment.

Michael Avedissian of Reading, Pennsylvania, is one of the organization's longest-term members. He moved from Germany to the United States in 1954 and joined Toastmasters the following year. He credits the Reading Toastmasters Club with saving his engineering career and his new life in America by helping him learn and practice English. "Toastmasters gave me the ability to deliver the reports and presentations that were required for my career."

Many organizations stall or even crumble during difficult economic times. Toastmasters has withstood the test of time and has even grown 5 percent annually since 2005 because it offers practical skills that are critical for success in today's competitive environment.

Ann Maxfield of Austin, Minn., recently was able to begin a new career as an e-learning coordinator at Hormel Foods. With her Toastmasters training, she aced the interviews. "People in management know about Toastmasters and look to it as valuable training for the skills and experiences they require in employees," she says.

The Toastmasters program also helps political and business leaders prepare for the demands of their positions. Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle is one of many with political aspirations who found help in Toastmasters. "It is the best and least expensive personal improvement class you can go to," says Lingle.

Today, clubs around the world will celebrate the anniversary with special meetings and events. In February 2010, the organization will hold its public event in Southern California with dignitaries and special guests. Details of the event will be announced in November.

About Toastmasters

Toastmasters International is a nonprofit educational organization that teaches communication and leadership skills through a worldwide network of clubs. The organization currently has more than 250,000 members in 12,500 clubs in 108 countries. Since its founding 85 years ago in October 1924, the organization has helped more than four million men and women give presentations with poise and confidence. For information about local Toastmasters clubs, please visit www.toastmasters.org.

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