

No More Dress Rehearsals By Ellen Arnestad

Last Friday night I had my first real debut. I have been in Toastmasters since March of 2003 and last Friday I got to speak at a banquet of 350 people. This is what it's all about, this is what we work towards, and the experience was not only gratifying, but fun!

Until now, I have been giving manual speeches from my CTM manual in front of my own Toastmasters club of 20+ friendly members. I have reached my 6th manual speech and I am in the process of creating my 7th. Now although I have some experience in speaking in front of people as I have taught in various capacities for many years, giving a speech to people paying for the experience is a totally different experience.

The opportunity came when the City of Calgary's Emergency Medical Services decided to celebrate some of the city's local heroes. The concept was to create an awards banquet to celebrate citizens who have saved the life of another citizen in dramatic and dire situations. These people have gone above and beyond the call of duty and deserve to be recognized. EMS recognizes them through this banquet with the retelling of the story, the presentation of a handmade gold & silver ring of native design (made by an artist that is also a city paramedic) and often the reuniting of rescuer with the person that they rescued.

One of the people very deserving of the award for this year's presentation was Paul McDougall. Paul saved the life of a young man who was trying to commit suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning. Paul gained access to his car, extricated him and helped him to start breathing again before the ambulance arrived. Without his quick thinking and action, the result would have been much different. As it was, the young man was saved and has been able to turn his life around in the year since this episode.

The organizers approached me to present the award to Paul because they knew of my interest and background in the field of suicide intervention. They asked me to present to the audience a reflection on suicide statistics and what they mean to everyone, and how acting to help someone gives that person another way out. After the brief words about suicide they wanted me to relate the story of how Paul helped this person and then present him with the ring and finally tell him that although the person he saved declined to come to the banquet, we had spoken to him and he wanted Paul to know how deeply he appreciated what he had done to help and how it had really given him another chance to work things out.

They gave me between 5-7 minutes for my presentation (wow! How could my Toastmasters experience have helped me more!) and other than the brief direction, let me write my own speech. I worked on it over the two weeks before the banquet and had it polished up by about 3 days before. Now it was time to

practice. First I read it over a number of times to get a solid idea of the direction that I was heading with it. Then I practiced it in my mind to and from work on the train. Then I gave the speech to my birds and the mirror a few times before I asked a few friends if they would sit and listen.

Unfortunately by this time, any comments that they might make to change the speech were just coming too late. To change it now would just confuse me, so although I did get some good suggestions, I decided to leave it as is so as not to confuse myself during the presentation. However, saying it to others really helped in the confidence that I wouldn't forget anything when the time came and the nerves were a little more frazzled.

Finally the night came and I did feel quite nervous. The room was beautifully appointed and full. I was feeling nervous, but was able to contain it. The person speaking before me said that he wasn't used to speaking in front of people, but with the lights the way they were he couldn't see anyone out there anyway, so it was easy. I thought that would help, but when I went up, I could see everyone clearly, including the mayor, a couple of aldermen and my boss. I was a little scared as I looked out over the crowd, but my preparation held me over. Once I started I forgot about all of the things that were scaring me and just went to what I knew was a good, well prepared speech.

As an A type personality I will always be the harshest critic of my own work, but it went fairly well. I found myself going too fast a couple of times, but was able to calm myself back down. I wandered away from the microphone a couple of times because I like to wander during my speeches, but when I heard the volume decrease I just went back to where my voice could be heard. Paul accepted his award with grace and said a few emotional words for the audience and it was over.

I really felt like I learned tons from this experience and I was so grateful to have the opportunity. It made me know that I can do this and that the experience that I have gained at Toastmasters in the past year really helped in bringing me to this point. As another confirmation that my speech had gone well, I heard from many friends and family that CFCN TV, who covered the event felt that my speech was good enough to be the TV news coverage for the event on the news later that night. So I guess that I got exposure to way more than the 350 that I thought I was speaking to. All in all I had a lot of fun and feel that my confidence has gone way up. I just wish that some of my Toastmaster friends had been there to do an objective evaluation for me.

(Feb 2004)