

## **AIR CADETS AND TOASTMASTERS: EFFECTIVE SPEAKING PROGRAM**

By Keith Lee

Do you remember how you formed ideas when you were a kid? Were you a brilliant speaker from an early age? Did people describe you as shy and thoughtful or boisterous and loud? I was definitely the former; I doubt that I would have had the guts to speak in front of a big audience before high school.

Through my experience with Toastmasters I got to meet and observe some young adults who did have the guts and then some. In December 2003 and January 2004 I had the opportunity to visit two different Royal Canadian Air Cadet League Squadrons and learn more about their effective speaking training program and contests.

Air Cadets is a free program that is open to young adults 12 and over which encourages participants to learn and develop skills through various programs emphasizing discipline, teamwork, and many other areas of interest.

My first exposure to the program was when I was invited to attend one of the effective speaking training sessions that was being held by the Air Cadet squadron based out of the VRRRI building near the University of Calgary campus. I met Lt. Mark Hisey, the officer in charge of the program, and then introduced to the students. This group of cadets was composed of seven young adults aged 12-15 with varying levels of experience with the league.

I was not quite sure how to proceed, but I ended up trying to guide the cadets through a modified Toastmasters meeting! I invited the cadets to first introduce themselves so that I could learn their names and a little about why they were in the program. I learned that one of the objectives of the program was to prepare the cadets for the upcoming Effective Speaking Competition that every squadron would be holding; winners from each squadron would advance to the area contest.

With this in mind, I asked the cadets if they knew what their speeches would be about and if any of them would be interested in presenting it that night as a “dry run”. Before the two volunteers began their presentations, I instructed the other cadets to pay attention to the speakers and make observations as to what they felt the speaker did well and what they might recommend as an area of improvement. I noticed that there were a lot of observations about eye contact and “scanning the room”, but not much emphasis on content or organization. Both speeches were commendable; I gave some suggestions to each speaker regarding alternative approaches to speech structure and what constitutes an effective speech (including an analogy about a lawyer defending a court case – will he always win on facts alone?) but was fairly positive about both.

The really interesting part of my session was when I suggested we close the meeting with some impromptu speaking practice. You see, during the Effective Speaking Competition, participants are judged based on both a prepared speech (3-5 minutes) and an impromptu

speech (1-2 minutes)... sound familiar? I quickly cobbled together some topics of varying complexity (including “computer viruses”, “your favorite magazine”, “taxes”, “the importance of air cadets”, etc) and handed them out. I learned that during the real competition, each participant is given their topic and then granted three minutes to prepare, so each of the cadets was given a similar time period to mull over their topic. Some of the cadets did extremely well considering the complexity of the topic, but others were stumped to the point of silence. Despite this difficulty I think that many of the cadets felt good about their brief speeches and seemed to appreciate how satisfying it can be to talk in front of an audience and hold their attention!

A few weeks later I had the opportunity to see the cadets from this class compete in their squadron contest. The cadets who were selected by the judging panel to advance to the next level were Lt Chow and Sgt Broadhurst. I was very impressed by the way that both speakers used language and related their stories about Terry Fox and John Defienbaker, respectively.

The next night I went to a different squadron based in SW Calgary to act as a judge for *their* contest alongside several other Toastmasters, including Rowena Romero, Robyn Hay and Bob Steele. This squadron (52) was based out of the Harold Panabaker Junior High School near Elbow Drive and seemed extremely well organized. They had nine contestants in the competition, but the quality of some of the speeches was undeniable. The winners of the contest were Sgt Al-Amyr Sumar and Cpl S. Sumar, who both delivered very accomplished speeches on the topic of “A Canadian Who Has Made a Difference”.

The thing that struck me the most about these programs was how many of the more effective speakers were able to look beyond the presentation of simple chronologies (facts and dates about significant milestones in the career of a historical figure, for instance) and grasped the fact that they could capture their audience’s attention by weaving those facts into a coherent and gripping story. At both contests I felt that the winners had truly gone beyond merely recounting history and succeeded by simply telling a focused narrative, complete with suspense, surprise, emotion and a satisfying finish.

Being involved in these projects has certainly made me appreciate how far I still need to go as a speaker, evaluator and facilitator of these kinds of programs! When one of the organizers of the VRRRI squadron’s contest asked me to say a few words at the end of the contest, I ended up talking for more than 10 minutes about the many interesting things that I observed that evening – hardly a focused speech! Being in Toastmasters can certainly boost your confidence about your public speaking skills and give you ‘cachet’ with others as a “good speaker”, but the real test of your skills and confidence is when you step out of the safety of the club. I know I wasn’t perfect but I did my best in an uncertain role, and learned a lot about myself (and Canadian history, to boot!)

I am glad that I had the opportunity to spend time with the cadets and volunteers of both squadrons and encourage other Toastmasters to try using their skills to benefit the community in their own way – it can be a very satisfying experience.

(Jan 21, 2004)