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Personality Profile

By VIVIENNE KENRICK

"The Book of Lists" ranks public speaking as the foremost fear of people around the world, double that of fear of dying.

To deal with this fear, the original Toastmasters Club came into being in 1903 in California's Orange County on the initiative of a leader of the Young Men's Christian Association. Recognizing that YMCA boys needed training in communication, he set up for them a club for public speaking. He gave the club the name, which suggests banquets with toasts and after-dinner speakers.



Jon R. Greiner

Today, Toastmasters International operates in over 50 countries and claims to be the world's premier self-improvement club. Through training in public speaking, it aims to improve each person's leadership skills, self-confidence and ability to communicate. On a visit to Tokyo, International President Jon R. Greiner said that in Toastmasters, "lives can be changed, one at a time."

Greiner, a Toastmaster for 32 years, exemplifies in his own calm, capable demeanor the value of a Toastmasters background. "I grew up on a farm in Kansas in a very small community," he said. "In such a small area you don't get exposed much to public speaking and presentation." On the farm he became accustomed to using mechanical equipment, and as a boy planned to become an engineer. He earned his first degree in mechanical engineering at Kansas State University, and entered the employ of Caterpillar, Inc. He said: "I became involved with Toastmasters when in the course of my work at Caterpillar I was told, 'We need you to make a presentation.' That was scary."

A friend introduced him to Toastmasters and, he said, "I knew right away there were benefits."

Greiner says that one of the key things that keeps people from being successful in life is lack of confidence. "They really cannot engage in discussions," he said. He sees this lack of confidence as permeating society from childhood on, and considers it a major handicap in everyday community life as well as in corporate hierarchies.

Conversely, "when you are more engaged, you are more satisfied," he said. "In corporations, the employee benefits, the company benefits." According to Greiner, some big companies are so aware of the value of Toastmasters' training that they sponsor their own in-house clubs. Corporations and government agencies concerned with customer contact at high levels look for ability in their

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employees to speak well and fluently and to get along with people.

Toastmasters methodology pays attention to every detail of speaking in public. Beginning with speech and content, it goes on to evaluate quality of voice, effectiveness of gestures and the significance of body language. It considers the choice of vocabulary, the effective use of visual aids, the powers of persuasion. It reaches the inspirational, "how to touch someone's heart," Greiner said.

Not everyone aspires to leadership or orations, but Toastmasters believe that most people want to feel at ease with others and able to hold their own in conversations. Toastmasters have programs for businesses, communities and young people from the age of 10. In club meetings, each participant evaluates others' efforts as well as giving his own speeches. "In this way we develop listening skills, too," Greiner said. In a table topics section, training is offered in impromptu speaking. "This elicits greater response to others," Greiner said. "We want the personality to shine through."

Greiner has a second degree in business management, and says that when he retires from the international presidency he will continue to take to Toastmasters his solid business background. He is now global product support manager for Caterpillar. In a wide range of lifelong interest, he accords music a prime place. He has sung in choirs, played the guitar, and still enjoys ballroom dancing. When his sons were small, he was a Little League coach. He remembers those days as "some of the most enjoyable times of my life."

He has received honors and recognition both inside and outside Toastmasters. He holds the Distinguished Toastmaster certificate, the organization's highest distinction. He believes that "life is a precious gift that we need to take and make the most of in order to make the world a better place. In Toastmasters we make the world a better place when we, one by one, become more capable of communicating and leading. I have seen the power of the Toastmasters programs to build confident, happy people."

Web site: www.toastmasters.org

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