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Inmates find their voices in speaking club

BY NICHOLAS SPANGLER

The toastmaster killed. Ditto for two of the three featured speakers. The grammarian merely robbed.

Welcome, distinguished guests and Gavel Club Gavaliers, to the Voices of Time Gavel Club.

The purpose of the club is to develop public speaking and leadership skills, just as it is in thousands of Gavel and Toastmasters clubs around the world. But Voices of Time meetings are held under guard in the family visiting room at Everglades Correctional Institution, and all 85 members are serving life sentences for violent crimes. Many committed their crimes as teenagers; most are in their 50s now. One is 81.

Eligible for parole under old sentencing guidelines, they are part of a transition program to prepare them for life on the outside.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

"Whether it's interviewing with a potential employer or the parole board or talking with a group of at-risk students, this program not only improves their communication skills, it improves their self-esteem . . . and that can only help," said Chris Wolfe, a public speaking coach from the outside who started the club last year and serves as its president.

"They need to be prepared," said Everglades warden Gisela Pichardo. ``By this time next year, they're going to be living next door to you and me."

Wolfe took the microphone first. "I'm so glad you're all here tonight! This is fantastic! We're going to have a great meeting!" he said, or shouted.

Now he handed off to "the one and only" James "Doug" McCray, 58, the toastmaster.

Gavel clubs follow the better-known Toastmasters model, but members pay reduced dues or, like those in Voices of Time, no dues at all.

Meetings follow a strict protocol: The toastmaster opens and closes with brief remarks and introduces the speakers in between. Almost everybody begins with a lengthy formal welcome (which on this

afternoon included members of the press, the warden, the assistant warden, the guards, Wolfe and his fiancée, Miami-Dade School Board member Dr. Marta Perez and Dr. Regina Shearn, head of the transition program, all in one breath).

Time limits are enforced by warning lights; notes are frowned upon. Crimes are mentioned but rarely in any detail. The peer evaluations that follow the speeches are uniformly upbeat; standing ovations are common.

"This is my 35th year of incarceration, and you guys are going to make me celebrate tonight by having the best Gavel Club meeting ever," McCray said.

The first speaker was Carl Robinson, 58. Outside, before the meeting started, Robinson said he'd been incarcerated for 32 years and was scared every day: "You never know who you're surrounding yourself with." His last parole interview hadn't gone so well, but he had another coming up in a week, and a tentative release date of May 13, but none of that made it into his speech.

"When I graduated from Jackson in '68, I thought I was on my way to being a professional baseball player," he said to the crowd.

"Uncle Sam had a different idea for me. I'm a Vietnam vet and went to Vietnam in '68."

Returning, "I got into all sorts of crimes with guys I thought were my friends, and I came to prison for first-degree murder. I've dedicated myself to four things: rededication, redirection, reeducation and rehabilitation. Gentlemen, I want to thank you for your time."

A good toastmaster knows when to mix heavy with light, and when the truth needs to get out of the way of a good line.

`OUT OF STEP'

"I've been in prison since I was 22," McCray said. "After all these years I feel as though I'm a 19th century anachronism, out of step, out of time. But Carl mentioned being born in 1950. I was born in '51" -- 1949, actually -- "which means someone else is older than I am."

Next up was Paul Votta, 60. Votta recalled an afternoon in New York's Central Park, 33 years ago, and "sitting on this bench is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen." They got to be good friends. "She was a real con artist. Not to mention, a robber."

Fast forward to last year, when he found out she'd been shot to death, right outside Chinatown, probably because she was robbing drug dealers, which Votta could never understand: "She *knew* those streets of New York. She *knew* that was something that couldn't be done."

Fast forward again, to just a few days before this Gavel Club meeting: "I found out she'd been to the doctor, diagnosed with cancer, told she had only six months to live . . . the next thing on my mind was, all of us here are going to get something she never got, and that's a second chance."

Talking later, Votta said he wanted to start an anger management program when he got out.

It was hard to reconcile the professed man of peace with the man who, in 1981, committed sexual battery, false imprisonment and armed robbery on somebody who had stolen money and drugs from him.

Or Robinson, who in prison has learnt and taught welding, sheet metal fabrication and architectural drafting, with the man who gunned down another on Senior Skip Day in 1974.

Or McCray, who spends his days reading mythology or teaching younger inmates, with the man who committed premeditated murder in 1973.

"I don't sympathize with them in any way whatsoever," Regina Shearn, the retired Florida International University criminal justice professor who heads the transitions program (and is, like Wolfe, a volunteer), said in a phone interview.

"But we all change. We're not the same people 35 years later. We have enough confidence in them to know they're not going to do it again."

There may be something to that. Of the 125 inmates who've been paroled from the transitions program, 10 have returned to prison for so-called "technical" reasons, like drinking or missing an appointment with a parole officer. Only one has returned for a criminal offense.

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