

Well Said!



By Hannah Sutherland
Staff Reporter

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Bob Davidson stands anxiously at the podium and looks out over the rows of people in the audience.

There's at least 200 pairs of eyes boring into him.

Butterflies flap uncontrollably in his stomach as he moves towards the microphone and takes the stage – the spotlight is on him.

A mild panic sets in and he speaks quickly and awkwardly – trying to relay the importance of gas detection equipment to a banquet hall full of business people.

The audience appears uncomfortable just watching him.

"I made my way through it, but I don't think I did a good job," Davidson says, looking back.

For six years, the 49-year-old struggled through the public speeches he was required to do through his job as a marketing manager for a company that sells gas-detection equipment.

“When I had to speak to large groups of people – I couldn’t do it.”

Then he joined White Rock Toastmasters – an organization that allows people to practice their communication skills.

After seeing a notice in the newspaper, Davidson decided to give the club a try and attend one of its meetings.

It was a Wednesday night at Earl Marriott Secondary, and Davidson was greeted at the doors of the high school by a Toastmaster, who directed him to the room where the meeting was held.

Inside the class, people were shuffling around, getting the room set up, putting out agendas – and setting up the podium.

The desks had been positioned in a large U-shaped circle, and Davidson quietly took a seat in one of them, and observed.

The group engaged in a number of speech activities, one of which is called Table Topics. Without notice, a member is given a subject to speak on for two minutes.

Being new, Davidson was asked to participate. He declined.

“I would’ve just gone blank – when you’re nervous like that, your mind doesn’t work well.”

But despite feeling uncomfortable, Davidson continued to attend meetings, and eventually became a member.

He had five Toastmasters clubs in the area to choose from, including Early Edition, The Rock, Evening Edition and Mariners, all which meet at different times.

“They all have their own personality,” Davidson said. “It’s not just one size fits all.”

Toastmasters is also an international organization, with 11,300 clubs in 90 countries.

Often times, when Davidson goes on a business trip, he looks up the local Toastmasters club and sits in on a meeting.

As the guest, he is usually obliged to do a Table Topic – which he doesn’t mind anymore.

“Because the format is so similar, it’s so easy to just step in.”

So far, he’s been to 12 different clubs across Canada and the U.S.

And after six years with White Rock Toastmasters, Davidson is now governor of Area 63 (all clubs on the Peninsula).

The club he’s involved with has about 20 to 30 members, 15 to 25 of whom will be at any given meeting.

Members rotate responsibilities, including executive positions within the club.

One person is assigned the role of “ah-counter” – someone who keeps track of how many times people use filler words when they’re speaking such as ‘um’ and ‘like’.

"The ah-counter is about listening, and developing good listening skills," Davidson said.

The club also holds competitions for members, such as the Humorous Speech Contest, set for Oct. 12 at 7 p.m. at Ocean Park Community Hall, 1577 128 St.

The winner will eventually go on to compete provincially, and, if he or she wins, internationally.

Prepared speeches are the main component of the club, Davidson said.

Members are given manuals on how to write and present speeches before picking a topic. Speakers have as long as needed to write and are given five to seven minutes to present.

"Everyone then has an opportunity to be evaluated," Davidson said, adding people are critiqued on meeting speech objectives and being comfortable. "It's allowed me to gather my thoughts and express them much better."

Davidson is aiming for the top level of achievement in the organization, which is Distinguished Toastmaster. He must complete 40 speeches to reach this goal.

"It's a two-year project from where I am now."

As a senior Toastmaster, Davidson has also mentored new members of the club.

He recalls one middle-aged mentee who was soft-spoken and couldn't project his speaking voice. Now, he has "vocal variety" – uses numerous tones in his voice – and is vice-president of the club's membership.

"One of the greatest things to see is someone step into the room who can barely stand up... and watch them develop. It's great," Davidson, who has mentored four people, said. "It's just a metamorphosis that you can see."

Davidson has come a long way himself.

Once afraid to speak in front of an audience, he is now MC for the Miss White Rock pageant, and has been for the last three years.

Now, when he gets up on the stage and looks over the sea of people watching him, he's a different person.

"I feel confident. I feel like it's my job to make this thing go smoothly – and I feel like I can do that."

For more information about Toastmasters, visit www.toastmasters.org or www.wrtm.ca, call 604-536-1940 or e-mail bobd@shaw.ca

Membership for White Rock Toastmasters costs \$10/month, but anyone is welcome to sit in on a meeting.