

He has a winning way with a speech



(Globe Staff Photo / Bill Greene)

By Susan Chaityn Lebovits, Globe Correspondent | September 15, 2007

CAMBRIDGE - Standing in an MIT classroom, Vikas Jhingran waved his hands and walked the length of a 17-foot blackboard, reenacting the speech that won him the title World Champion of Public Speaking last month from Toastmasters International.

The 34-year-old doctoral candidate is only the second New Englander to bring home the prize since 1938, when the contests began. In his winning speech, titled "The Swami's Question," Jhingran, a native of Calcutta, told the judges about how he found his true potential after visiting the village wise man, who asked him a simple question: "Who are you?"

Jhingran says he's been able to use his foreign accent - often viewed as an encumbrance - to his advantage. "Everyone listens because it's different," Jhingran says. But he's also learned that he must be vigilant in speaking slowly in order to be understood.

Jhingran moved to the United States in 1995 to attend Texas A&M University. After graduation he landed a job designing oil rigs for Exmar Offshore Company in Houston. But he says he became frustrated that despite spending months, if not years, working on a project, he wasn't given the opportunity to present his own work to potential clients.

"The stakes can be pretty high if you're trying to sell a \$3 million rig," Jhingran says. "Companies send in people that can make an impression, usually someone in marketing or an engineer with 15-20 years of service who's very comfortable talking."

In 2003 Jhingran decided to hone his public speaking skills. He took a Dale Carnegie class, which set him back \$1,500. When it ended three months later he joined a Toastmasters club in Houston. When he left Houston for MIT, he says, he contacted the campus Toastmasters clubs before the housing department.

Toastmasters is a nonprofit educational organization founded more than 80 years ago by a group of California businessmen who wanted to practice the art of public speaking. There are now 10,500 clubs in 90 countries. Jhingran belongs to 2 of the 145 clubs in the state of Massachusetts. Both - "Humor and Drama" and "Friday Toastmasters" - meet on the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

During this year's competition, held in Phoenix, an audience of 2,000 watched 20 Toastmasters judges evaluate 10 finalists from around the globe. All arrived at the finals following a six-month process of elimination beginning at the local club level and advancing to area, division, district, and then regional competitions. Criteria in judging included

speech content, organization, voice quality, and gestures. All of the speeches were rigidly timed, and contestants were disqualified if they spoke for fewer than 4 minutes, 30 seconds or more than 7 minutes, 30 seconds.

"There were some very polished speakers in the competition," says Jhingran. "Much better than I was. But a speech runs much deeper than words and pronunciation."

While he practices his speeches in front of a mirror, Jhingran says, he finds it most effective to stand in front of an audience and get their feedback. So Jhingran makes a point of visiting other clubs to hone his craft. He says one of his favorites is the "Renaissance Advanced Club," which meets in Westborough, as many members are professional speakers who come to practice segments of their presentations.

Initially, Jhingran says, his winning speech was quite ordinary, but he took some advice from the 2001 champion, Darren LaCroix, and assigned visual space on stage for each character he was addressing, such as the swami.

"A lot of detail goes into planning speeches like this," Jhingran says. "I start with a particular emotion that I want to exude from the audience." Jhingran says he uses both everyday life experiences and movies to research what touches people, including himself. "You start noticing things, in movies or songs or speeches, that make you feel emotional - voice inflections, the environment you build around the story, and facial expressions."

One of Jhingran's previous speeches, called "The Color of Love," recalls the embarrassment he felt as a teenager around his grandmother in public, later realizing that her actions were out of love. In another speech, "Perfect," he humorously discussed the realities of his arranged marriage, conveying emotions of insecurity and passion.

Jhingran wears a large topaz ring on his right index finger. Many Indians, he says, believe that certain stones can channel energy and that each person's composition is made for a particular stone. "If you wear the wrong stone it can do a lot of damage; if you wear the right stone it can help you in many ways," Jhingran says. Topaz is said to help Jhingran with his health and personality. "I don't necessarily believe in it, but I don't see any harm in wearing it. I'm not taking any chances."

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