

## Perfecting the art of public speaking? They'll toast to that

By BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON / Lincoln Journal Star

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Here we are in an electronic age where love is spelled "luv" and you is spelled "u," where proper speech is misunderstood as frequently as it is appreciated.

Here they are in a downstairs room at The Cornhusker hotel, in suits and skirts, in T-shirts and jeans, in tears one moment, laughing the next

They can't stop laughing at a blind man. Of course, this is what Dana LaMon wants. This is how he knows he's got them.

"If you're an effective communicator, you make them think or you make them feel," LaMon says to those gathered there. "If you're a superb speaker, you make them do both."

He sometimes pauses intentionally when speaking, but not this time. Donning suit and tie, he keeps consistent pace with his words. His voice rises slightly.

Heads he cannot see nod. Audience members lean forward in their seats. The man named the best public speaker in the world in 1992 has done it. He's got them

And make no mistake, they like being gotten. These are people who appreciate the power of communication, the greatness of a speechmaker who can control a room. These are the Toastmasters.

It was 1924 when a man named Ralph Smedley called a meeting of co-workers at a YMCA in Santa Ana, Calif. He had a simple idea. Our business might do better if we communicate better. How about we get together and talk about public speaking?

Smedley Club Number 1, they called it. Thankfully, a name change arrived — Toastmasters sounds more formidable than the Smedleys, don't you think? — and soon came more members.

"Sometimes a man gets a hold of an idea, and it will shape his entire life," Smedley once said. So it was with him.

By the 1950s, Toastmasters clubs had sprouted throughout the United States, and today there are about 11,000 in 92 countries. About 220,000 people call themselves members, and about half of them are women, who were not allowed into the fold until 1973.

Granted, many of these people came to their first Toastmasters meetings with shaking knees. If the choice were jumping from an airplane or speaking before a room full of people, plenty would ask where they might find the plane.

"With most people, they don't know how good they are until they come to a meeting and someone points it out," says Chris Ford, who is expected to be named the next president of Toastmasters International in August. "They're nervous as hell. They'd rather die, thank you very much. Yet they do a very credible job."

It's not just that people are frightened of boardroom speeches. Even one-on-one conversations have become increasingly difficult to manage in a world gone mad with text messaging, online gibberish and yellow smiley faces that now represent emotions.

Not long ago, someone sent LaMon an e-mail, and his talking computer told him one of the letter's words was LOL.

What does that mean? He had to ask a friend. (It stands for "laugh out loud.")

The beast that is technology has given us much, but for all its splendor, it has made us poor communicators.

And so they come to a Lincoln hotel, these Toastmasters. There is Jean Dier from down the road. There is Matt Rief from Grand Island. Mona Cooley from Calgary, Alberta? Wait. You came from Canada? She nods.

They came this weekend for a regional meeting. Two days of speeches about giving speeches.

"What's the most important word in speaking?" speaking pro Craig Valentine asks.

Silence, just for a second, then someone answers.

"You?"

Valentine affirms the answer. "You. And it's not used enough."

He asks for a volunteer. He tells that volunteer to ask the crowd in any way he wants how many people have ever been to Baltimore.

"OK," the volunteer says. "By a show of hands, how many people here have been to Baltimore?"

Hands go up. Valentine asks the man if he thinks he should have asked the question differently. The man's unsure.

Valentine says how he would have asked it: "Have YOU ever been to Baltimore?"

Ah, yes. You.

A moment later, Valentine tells the audience he scored a 730 the first time he took the SAT. That's 730 points total out of a possible 1,600 on the college entrance exam.

"Why'd I share that?"

People throw out answers.

"It's a 'me, too' moment," he says. "Share your failures and flaws."

If there ever were a case study on why standardized testing has its flaws, Craig Valentine is it. The man rebounded to earn his master's of business administration degree at Johns Hopkins University.

Life got even more interesting after he read "Live Your Dreams" by motivational speaker Les Brown. Hmm, Valentine thought, that would be a decent way to make a living.

One problem. He was a horrible speaker as a kid.

"They used to call me Daffy Duck because I had a huge lisp," he says.

He pursued the dream anyway. He read some books on speaking, then made the plunge, joining Toastmasters in March 1998.

By summer 1999, he was in Las Vegas competing at the annual International Speech Contest.

"Nobody's ever died from a snake bite," began the speech that gave Valentine the title of world champion speaker.

He says he still fights the perception that he is maybe just a natural speaker. "I'm Toastmasters-made."

He's got his own Web site, wears stylish suits and has traveled the world giving speeches. He became exactly what he wanted to become.

But what's it like to be on that stage when you know you've got an audience?

"It's like ..."

He pauses, smiles. He wants to get this just right, because it's a beautiful thing.

"Gosh, it just feels like you're one (with the audience). It feels like you're dancing."

LaMon was running backward at age 4 when he fell.

His head split open, and that was the best news. His retinas became detached from the blow.

Doctors did what they could, but this was 1956. His sight slowly left him. He was using Braille by fifth grade, a cane by age 17. He lost all light perception by age 24.

Still, he graduated from Yale. Still went to law school. Still became a judge. Still agreed to speak at his friend's wedding even though his friend asked specifically for a humorous speech.

LaMon started sweating. He was a funny guy, but his humor usually came off the cuff. Now he was being asked to deliver it on cue.

It was 1988. He gave a great wedding speech that made people laugh. He joined Toastmasters anyway. He wanted to figure out why they laughed.

Four years later, he seemed to have the art of humorous speaking figured out. He gave a speech he thought was funny, one he would be giving at the International Speech Contest, at his local Toastmasters club in California. No one laughed.

"Don't you see," he asked. "There are eight places in this speech where people are going to laugh."

He smiles. He read that speech later at the contest.

"Got eight laughs," he says. "And three others."

But if you really want to know what Toastmasters can mean to a person, he needs to tell you a story about a woman named V.

It's going to make him cry, so he pulls out a tissue.

She showed up to his Toastmasters club one day. A lady named Audrey brought her.

"This is my guest," Audrey said. "We call her V. Her name is Vionne, but we call her V."

"Can't V say her own name?" LaMon asked.

Silence.

He asked again.

Silence.

V left and didn't come back for some time. LaMon figured she wouldn't ever be back.

But V kept going to Toastmasters meetings at another club. She kept knocking off the 10 Table Topics — various speech assignments required of Toastmasters to earn the title of competent communicator.

The 10th assignment is to give an inspirational speech. That's when LaMon met a less-timid V.

She had a speech to give him. LaMon starts to cry.

"It was called, 'I Can Say My Name Now.'"

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Craig Valentine gives a presentation called "Champions Edge," during a Toastmasters workshop at the Cornhusker Marriott Saturday. The worldwide organization that promotes the art of public speaking held their regional convention in Lincoln this weekend. (William Lauer)