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Public speaking, without fear

Mountain Toastmasters helps members gain confidence in their elocutions

By Stephanie Alderton

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On a recent evening, the Evergreen-based Mountain Toastmasters gathered, as they do twice a month, to fight one of humanity's worst fears — public speaking.



Forrest Czarniecki

Barbara May tells the story "The Camel and the Peaches" at a Toastmasters meeting at the Seniors' Resource Center in Evergreen.

Toastmasters International started 90 years ago as a group of Californian businessmen trying to improve their communication skills by making short speeches. It is now a worldwide organization with more than 270,000 members, but its focus is still on helping professionals improve their job prospects by becoming better public speakers. Mountain Toastmasters, the branch serving Conifer, Bailey, Evergreen and the surrounding mountain towns, has been around for 20 years.

Deb West, a scientist who works at a Denver water treatment plant, said she joined the group two years ago because her public speaking phobia was getting in the way of her job.

"My boss asked me to do a presentation on chlorine chemistry and safety," she said. "It's something I know well, and it's to people that I work with every day. And as soon as I got in front of the room and tried to talk, I just lost it. I couldn't remember what I was going to say; I was nervous, and it was like, 'OK, I need to do something about this.'"

West is not alone. Most members of Mountain Toastmasters started with at least mild anxiety, if not a crippling fear, of speaking in front of others, even though most are otherwise very successful

in their fields. Michael Dietzenbach, the chapter's current president, cited studies showing that people who join Toastmasters are more likely to get promoted than their peers.

'The Camel and the Peaches'

Fear took a backseat during the recent meeting. The 10 members of the club, along with a few guests and former members, came to the Seniors' Resource Center 30 minutes early for a "happy half-hour" of food, drink and conversation. The friendly atmosphere didn't dissipate when Dietzenbach, called the meeting to order, precisely at 7 p.m.

The evening's theme was "holiday traditions," so the group members started by introducing themselves and their favorite Christmas and New Year's activities. During the "table topics" section of the meeting, members volunteered to give a short, extemporaneous speech answering a holiday-related question.

Everyone had a chance to speak, which is another facet of Toastmasters' philosophy — no one leaves a meeting without contributing something. The program seeks to develop leadership skills as well as speaking skills, so official positions in each club rotate every year.

West was one of two members who gave longer, prepared speeches at the meeting. The other was Barbara May, who joined the program just two months before. She dramatically told an Arabian folk tale called "The Camel and the Peaches."

May hopes to become a professional storyteller, and she joined Toastmasters to gain some experience. A recent visit to an assisted-living center had inspired her.

"They have the television blasting," she said of the center. "And these poor old ladies are in their wheelchairs sitting kind of with their heads down, and it's, like, 'The Jerry Springer Show,' with people screaming. ... So I was thinking, maybe if I could tell them a story, that would be better than Jerry Springer."

Each speaker was assigned an evaluator who provided feedback at the end of the meeting, focusing on positive suggestions.

"Your timing, your position, your pacing, your body language, your voice inflection, the story itself — I loved it," said Rick Durden, May's evaluator. He added that she should work on using more of the space at the front of the room, and recovering more quickly from mistakes.

There were a few new faces in the room. One of them, Stephen Alarid, is an artist with the Pirate Gallery in Denver. Even though it was his first time at a Toastmasters meeting, he stood up to give an impromptu speech during the table talks.

"As an artist, I reach out to the public a lot of times," he said. "And being a member of the Pirate Gallery, I thought I could learn a lot, and I did."

Members of Mountain Toastmasters pay semi-annual dues of \$55, plus a \$20 "new member fee" at the beginning. The group meets at

the Seniors' Resource Center on the second and fourth Monday of every month. All meetings are open to the public.