

The Makeover: My Journey with Toastmasters

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Have you ever wished for a certain talent? I have! As a quiet, timid introvert, I lacked eloquence and was terrified of public speaking. I longed to be a proficient speaker. Thanks to Toastmasters, It has transformed me into an accomplished speaker-leader through its simple, systematic four-phase training process. The four phases are: Recognizing Shortcomings, Embracing Challenges, Learning to Serve, and Enjoying the Power of Community. Let me share my Toastmasters journey and inspire you to acquire any talent you may desire.

Recognizing Shortcomings

Understanding our background helps us see why we are the way we are. As the youngest girl in a big family, my voice was often overshadowed by my elder siblings, leading to my quiet and shy personality.

Back in 6th grade, I had written an essay that the teacher thought was excellent. He wanted it be presented at the school assembly. Because I was not a good speaker, he planned to have another girl deliver it. But he changed his mind at the last minute. He wanted me to do it myself! Being unprepared and terrified, I read the entire speech, from my Essay Book, trembling all the way through. That embarrassing experience cemented my fear of public speaking for years.

Then in 1982, a colleague invited me to a Toastmasters meeting to watch him give a speech. That experience was daunting. As he spoke, I noticed the Grammarian was busy taking notes of his language usage. I heard the Ah Counter hitting a gong for filler words like Ah's and Um's. And I saw the Timer flashing Color Cards to warn him to stay within time limits. I was scared away, convinced that these "tortures" were not for me.

But in 1989, I realized that hard work alone wasn't enough for career advancement. Promotions often favored the eloquent speakers over hard workers. Besides, all the jobs require excellent speaking skills. This insight made me determined to overcome my fear of speaking and take the Toastmasters "tortures".

Embracing Challenges

Once I recognized my shortcomings, I began improving my speaking skills in Toastmasters. The self-paced program allowed me to design my own curriculum. There were over 300 communication and leadership competencies. I got to choose what and when to learn according to my own schedule.

The first six months were tough. Surrounded by native English speakers, I felt inferior. It took me months to prepare one speech, while others did it overnight. I worked very hard on my icebreaker speech. I finally delivered it on October 17, 1989. My hard work paid off. I won the Best Speaker Award of the day. I felt like an earthquake has shaken my world! Literally, a 7.2 earthquake hit San Francisco that day. I still believe that my winning was the real cause of that earthquake!



I didn't have an assigned mentor. Every meeting and every member were my virtual mentors. Observing contestants in speech contests, I learned to craft inspiring and humorous speeches. Though I found competing stressful, it motivated me to improve. I wasn't just competing with others; I was competing with myself. Each time I won, it pushed me to work harder and grow stronger. It prepared me to face better speakers at higher levels of competition.

Embracing challenges gave me the courage to overcome my shortcomings and motivated me for personal growth. The American Activist Whitney M. Young once said, "It is better to be prepared for an opportunity and not have one than to have an opportunity and not be prepared". So, I made myself an open vessel for lifelong learning. I discovered that the skills I learned in Toastmasters were transferable to my professional and social lives. In 2008, despite being laid off, I secured a higher paying job in a completely new field using my Toastmasters learned skills. The following year, I received a remarkable raise of \$24,000 while many were facing pay cuts and layoffs.

Learning to Serve

Embracing challenges pushed me out of my comfort zone. Initially, I wasn't proficient in new skills, but with practice, I became an expert. The supportive Toastmasters environment allowed me to practice and learn. I attended every meeting, visited other clubs, and learned to share and to give constructive feedback.

Toastmasters' Founder, Dr Ralph Smedley believed that the best way to own a skill is to practice and share. Over the years, I seized every opportunity to learn, practice, and share. This sharing greatly contributed to my personal growth. I attained numerous awards, I achieved four Distinguished Toastmaster Awards in 15 years. I was the District Champion for Humorous Speech and Interpretive Reading, and was the District Second Place Winner in International Speech and Tall Tale contests. I was the Outstanding Toastmaster-of-the-year, the Outstanding Area Governor-of-the-year. I have chaired many District Programs.

However, my most fulfilling accomplishment was not my personal growth but mentoring others. I have mentored many individual members and inspired some of them for higher leadership roles. I steered my Home Club to maintain in the highest President Distinguished Honor for 24 subsequent years. I was one of the District Top Club Ambassadors, and a Club Coach to help clubs rebuild membership and meeting quality. I had helped start, and mentor more than a dozen Corporate and Community new clubs.

Enjoying the Power of Community

Toastmasters meetings provided a wonderful forum to learn, practice, and share skills. The community helped me fine-tune my abilities to cope with various people and situations.

Interestingly, it seems that there is a universal ultimate goal for Share & Serve. My High School has a motto "Vos Parate Ut Serviatis—修己善群—Prepare Yourself to Serve Others". At a similar wavelength, Toastmasters promotes "Let us share with others the benefits we have gained for ourselves". Even the Bible says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve". This Share & Serve concept has resonated deeply within me all the time.

In 2015, the USA Chapter of my High School Alumni Association was desperately seeking someone to lead the Organization. But no one stepped forward because of family, career or health issues. Since I was involved during the early years, and was equipped with the Toastmasters Leadership training and experience, I couldn't find any reason to decline the challenge. And I have been serving as its President for almost a decade now.

I also used my learned skills to serve other Service Organizations like Optimist and Lion Clubs. They often turned to Toastmasters for help when they need Speakers or Speech Contest Judges. These collaborations had fostered stronger inter-community relationships and built a larger, better community.

Over the years, I had taught Sunday School for children. I was a translator for non-English speaking immigrants at churches and for young new immigrant students at a local Elementary School. I started a Neighborhood Watch group with my neighbors. I volunteered at the local events on Citizen Day and Election Day. I coordinated with several colleagues for carpooling to work. My community got bigger and bigger as I extended my sharing and serving to everyone around me even via Promotion Booths and Newspapers.

Gratitude and Growth

I am profoundly grateful for the supportive, positive learning environment of Toastmasters. My journey from a quiet introvert to a confident speaker and leader is a testament to the power of lifelong learning and the importance of serving others. Recognizing my shortcomings helped me identify the skills I needed to develop. Embracing challenges enhanced my confidence and personal growth. Learning to serve showed me true success lies not in personal achievements but in uplifting and empowering others. Enjoying the power of community enabled me to find true fulfillment and make a lasting impact in the world.

I highly recommend this four-phase personal development process: Recognizing Shortcomings, Embracing Challenges, Learning to Serve, and Enjoying the Power of Community. Take action now! Develop your talent today, enjoy a better world tomorrow!

Sharing in Newspaper 1997

C5 Community News
July 24, 1997 Thursday
Sing Tao Daily

5 社區新聞
1997年7月24日 星期四
星島日報

謝少芳本人認為，今次能榜上有名，實是很難得的成就，加上首二名的美國人更是荷里活娛樂界人士，從事電影製作及喜劇寫作，而謝少芳僅是個處事嚴厲的化學研究員，自知沒有天賦的口才及幽默感，今次參加幽默組比賽是個破天荒的大膽嘗試，夢想不到成績竟如此理想，更發掘了自己隱藏的潛質，原來那些「我不懂說話」及「我沒有幽默感」只是誤導自己的腦海障礙，事實上她是擁有國際水準的演講技巧與幽默感。


謝少芳的一篇「青春永駐」不但故事構思精采絕倫，主題更是大眾化，迎合一般人的口味。她將一個普遍令人尷尬的社會問題，高齡未婚，變得輕鬆滑稽，極具娛樂性，更把幽默手法如誇大、幽默穿插、雙關俏皮話、嘲弄、誤解、隱蔽語、同音字等技巧應用得恰當無遺，惹得全場數百位觀眾笑破肚皮。

國際演講會是個不平利的教育機構，全球均有分會，完全是自修課程，共有五級的溝通及領袖訓練，會員自行選擇進度，拿取 CTM, ATM, ATM - Bronze, ATM - Silver 及 DTM (分別是 Competent Toastmaster, Able Toastmaster 與 Distinguished Toastmaster) 文憑。大多數會員只完成第一、二級便離去，全球有十八萬會員，但只有二萬個 DTM 及六千個 ATM。謝少芳參加了七年多，起步時是個非常害羞及恐懼說話的人，她花了二年半才完成第一級課程。但後來進步神速，過去一年內還拿到二個 DTM 呢！謝少芳是唯一的華人拿到二項 DTM (TM 比賽的冠軍) 幽默組及文章閱讀組)。她還說笑說待她公餘時間要好好坐下來作一本 Dear, Can Speak, So Can You 的書呢！謝少芳覺得演講會的課程無論對任何人都很有幫助，很多教師、作家都極力推薦，而很多公司都替員工付那五十多元的年費，鼓勵員工進修。雖然灣區有很多亞裔專業人士，但她發覺亞裔會員則很少，主要是觀念問題，亞裔人士普遍只是關注子女的教育，而忽略進修自己。

謝少芳聲稱演講會不但訓練會員的視、聽、講的能力，還能加強個人的分析、組織、計劃、籌備及處事、處世的各種能力，更可以認識各行各業的朋友，亦是個做網絡的好地方。由於現時科學研究的基金愈來愈少，謝少芳也考慮，用她在國際演講會學來的溝通及領導技巧，加上能寫能講中、英文及流利的國、粵語，大可擴展她找工作的範圍，所以演講會訓練的益處，遠超過表面的演講技巧訓練。

欲知有關國際演講會更多資料，可致電四一五·八五九·二〇九四與謝少芳聯絡或發電熱線四一五·四三七·四〇二九或四〇八·四九一·二〇四。

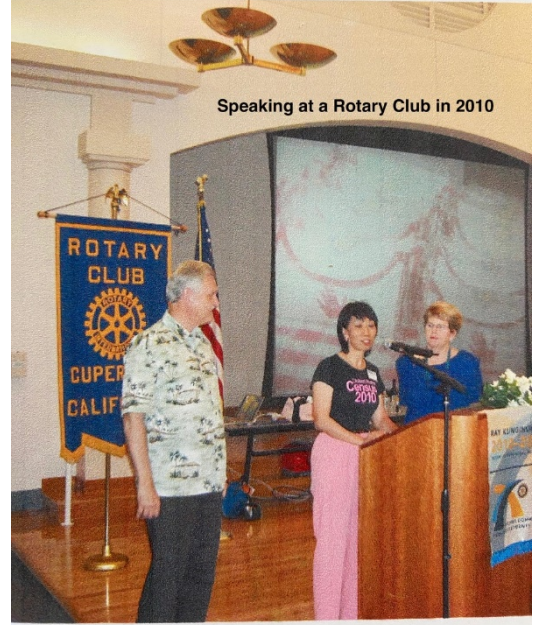
七載修練演講技巧終嚐成功美果 為天下華人創下歷史性光榮一頁 謝少芳揚名西岸獲演講決賽季軍



Sharing at Street Fair Booth 1995



Speaking at a Rotary Club in 2010



Serving the Optimist Club

