

The Polish of Toastmasters

Ever since I was a little girl, I loved public speaking. It came as natural to me as breathing. It had taken me across the globe, from sharing my experiences as an exchange student in Japan to attending college in London. As a student at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, I regularly spoke in front of large groups as a member of the Student Center Programming Board. Getting up to speak in front of a crowd was like a walk in the park for me, and I relished every opportunity!

My ability to speak before others literally came to a screeching halt shortly after I began my senior year of college. Four sorority sisters and I were returning to Ball State after spending the day at another campus. Our driver lost control of the vehicle, and it was hit from behind by a speeding Freightliner semi-tractor. While the two in the front seat were able to unbuckle themselves and walk away from the crash, the three of us in the back seat weren't so lucky. Two friends, riding unbuckled, were instantly killed. I was the only unbuckled back-seat survivor.

Awaking from a coma six days after the crash, I shockingly learned to prepare for adjustment to a new lifestyle. I had sustained a traumatic brain injury, resulting in substantial memory loss. In addition, the right-hand side of my body was paralyzed, my right lung had collapsed, and I had no control over my bodily functions. Damage to my right vocal cord left me unable to speak at first. Once a confident and ambitious young college student, I now spent my days in a wheelchair, enduring the humiliation of wearing adult diapers. My self-esteem and self confidence plummeted like the stock market in 1997.

It was a long, slow path to recovery, but a year and a half later, I was able to finish college. Wanting to fully regain my self-confidence, I contacted our local chapter of ThinkFirst, a brain and spinal cord injury prevention organization, and volunteered as a speaker. My first presentation was awful. I had to speak sitting at a desk at the front of a class of high schoolers, reading from note cards because my memory was so poor. I questioned whether public speaking was the right choice for me.

Four years ago, a friend asked me to present the keynote speech at a conference for college financial aid administrators. I jumped at the chance, but then a little voice in the back of mind began asking whether I could once again get up in front of a large crowd and deliver a dynamic presentation. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to practice before a group of co-workers prior to the conference. One was a Toastmaster, who evaluated my presentation and suggested a few areas for improvement. He encouraged me to join a Toastmasters group where I could get practice polishing my abilities. His comments gave me hope. Determined to speak without using notes, I practiced and videotaped the presentation until the repetition overcame my continuing memory problems. The conference keynote went off without a hitch before an audience of several hundred, and the president of the association praised my performance. I was so excited! Yet, I felt something was missing. The seed that my co-worker planted in my head about Toastmasters was imbedded in my thoughts, but I didn't know how to find a chapter.

Then one day, my company, State Auto Insurance, announced that we would start a Toastmasters club at work, and I became a charter member. As I completed speech after speech in the manual, I gained more confidence in myself and my abilities. Table topics scared me at first because it seemed to take forever for my brain to retrieve and

organize information for a response. Repeated practice once again paid off! On my most recent table topics speech, my evaluator told me that I not only answered the question, but provided three points as support. This was a big deal for me. I didn't think it was possible, with my brain injury, to be able to think on my feet and give a flawless, organized answer.

This summer, I was the keynote speaker at a luncheon attended by the co-worker who had critiqued me four years ago. I asked if he would evaluate me once again. At the conclusion of my multi-media presentation, he had a big smile on his face. In his evaluation, he wrote, "I have to say, this presentation is light years ahead of the one I saw a few years ago."

Thank you, Toastmasters, for helping me regain my lost confidence. Any tarnish left by my brain injury has been polished away. Once again, speaking comes as natural to me as taking a breath!