

Ahum...giving speeches can be learned: the speech hobbyists

Giving speeches just for fun. It exists, according to **Eveline Stoel**. At Toastmasters, business people, shy types and fathers of the bride, all come together to give speeches.

Clammy hands, red spots on the neck, perspiration and a stammering voice: speaking in public can be a nerve-wracking experience, even for experienced speakers. Still, there is a group of people who regularly come together in Amsterdam and do it just for fun. In Lydia Community Center, on Roelof Hart Square, speeches are given on any number of subjects, such as bike touring vacations, the European Union and unusual culinary experiences in foreign lands. Hands are shaken and compliments given out, and a there's a lot of laughter. 'It's fun to speak' is the message of De Sprekers, so as they call themselves.

"I hated speaking, but I realized that I had to learn it for my work," says club member Anna Marie Born (64), a network marketer in her daily life. "Before the first meeting, I wanted to call and cancel three times. I had fights at home, slammed doors, but since then I have overcome my fear and I really look forward to these gatherings. I have made enormous personal growth. Before, in groups, I always had an opinion, but I only shared them afterwards. These days I speak up much more easily.

Her 30 year old daughter Sarah, a real



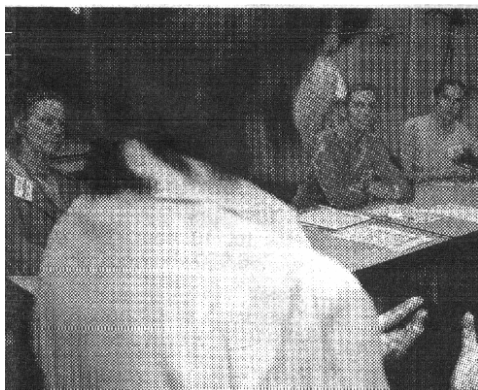
ICE BREAKERS: humor en anecdotes are important in speeches, according to the Toastmasters speech club; President Reagan laughs at a joke from Queen Elizabeth II about the weather during a speech at a state dinner in San Francisco in 1983

estate project developer, was so impressed by her mother's progress that she also became a member. "To dare to speak up in public is not only useful in your career," she explains. "I see how my mother engages people more quickly at parties now; she listens and has become calmer. Once I even took debating classes during summer school in America. There I was told how you must stand and how you should use your voice. Useful, but in the end, you still learn best when it becomes second nature. I see that happening faster with this system."

INFORMAL SPEAKERS CLUB

The system Sarah is talking about is from Toastmasters International. A non-profit organization founded in 1924 in California; their goal is to help people

learn to speak and to increase their social skills. Worldwide there are more than 195.000 members, spread over 9,300 clubs in eighty countries. At the moment, there are six clubs in The Netherlands: in Naarden, The Hague, Rotterdam and Amsterdam, of which one is only open to Heineken employees and five of which are in English. De Sprekers is the only group where Dutch is the language used. "The strength of Toastmasters is that it is informal," says Ay Ling Tan (38), who in 2001 founded the Amsterdam Toastmasters Club. "You don't only meet business people here. Everyone is welcome; also people who have to speak at a wedding or who just want to become more assertive. You can hear the most interesting things. For example, an Egyptian club member impersonated three



Learning speaking informally at Toastmasters in Amsterdam Photos Jørgen krielen

different personalities, in order to give three different perspectives of Egyptian art. We keep the atmosphere relaxed on purpose. Afterwards, we usually go for a drink."

Tan, herself, discovered Toastmasters in Korea, where she lived for a few years in the late 90's. "Someone took me along to a meeting and I had such a wonderful evening that I decided to join. When I got back to the Netherlands, I looked for a

similar club, but I couldn't find anything. So, I started one myself." Because she did it with an English-speaking friend, Tan started with an English-speaking club. That Toastmasters group still exists and is especially popular with expats. A few months later, she started with De Sprekers. "Speaking in your own language feels more secure," she explains. "Besides that, I think it's a pity that so few people tell a good story in Dutch."

MANUAL

Toastmasters International developed a manual in which all the basic speech skills for giving a speech are offered. Among other things, it explains what ice breakers are (anecdotes, rhetorical questions), how speeches are made more lively (gestures, vocal variety), and the importance of humor and body language. "Everyone works through the manual on their own," says Tan. "You can even choose your own subjects for your speeches. You receive reactions from the group and you go a step further. When you have done all the chapters in the book you are a Competent Toastmaster. Then you can choose from fifteen advanced manuals that each handle a certain type of speech. You can focus your learning on, for example, sales presentations or entertaining speeches."

You notice that the organization has no teachers. The club members give each other improvisation topics, keep track of how often "ah" is used during talks, and they evaluate each other's speeches. Fierce criticism is not allowed, but that does not mean that negative points are not touched upon. "We give suggestions for improvement," says organization advisor Thierry de Wijn (40). "Pointing

out someone's faults is not constructive. Once I took a professional and very expensive speech course where there was a camera pointed at my face for two days. It did not work for me. Here I feel welcome and we learn from each other. That on-the-spot feeling I had when it was my turn to speak is completely gone. Giving speeches is really now a hobby, that coincidentally is also useful.

Also Anna Marie Born is an advocate of Toastmaster's relatively soft approach. "There is not one way to speak well," she declares. "Everyone has plus points and we all emphasize them. I have seen people build their courage, boring speakers suddenly become amusing and people, that did not dare to say anything in the beginning, now talk the whole evening with each other. But if it's necessary to intervene, we do say something about it. After someone has given four difficult to understand speeches, strong comments certainly are given. Regardless of how enjoyable it all is, ultimately we all are sitting here to improve ourselves."

According to Born, speaking easily is also a question of doing it a lot. "In America, they have lessons in speaking skills in school and you can see it. As soon as an American finds a microphone under his nose, he becomes sort of a star – immediately a whole story comes out. That country better understands that public speaking is something that you can benefit from, in business and in private life."

SPEECH COACH

The California native Bill Monsour (49) agrees that speaking in America is a well developed skill. "In high school you often have to give book reports and in college you have lessons in public speaking. Being able to expressing yourself is part of

the culture. Throughout America you can find Toastmasters clubs. There are also specialty clubs. The Gourmet Toastmasters in California, for example, meets in chic restaurants where they practice toasts and after-dinner speeches."

For five years Monsour has been working in the Netherlands as a speech coach for individuals and large companies such as Cisco Systems and Philips. Why would someone who gives presentation technique coaching be a member of Toastmasters? "Because sometimes I want feedback too," says Monsour. He took part in various competitions of Toastmasters International and became the English speaking champion of the Benelux in two categories. In *De Sprekers* he hopes to improve his Dutch language speeches. "This is a fun, natural way for me to build my self-confidence with Dutch and to meet new people at the same time."

Monsour thinks that in Amsterdam alone there is potential for at least ten Toastmasters clubs that usually have between 30 and 50 members. "Many Toastmasters members speak with so much excitement about their club that outsiders sometimes think that we are a cult," laughs Monsour. "But this has nothing to do with money or religion, only volunteers and enthusiasm. What could be wrong with learning to communicate better?"

Membership in De Sprekers costs 75 euro per half year. The club members come together every two weeks. Information: www.toastmasters.nl

[Translation by Bill Monsour]