

Interview with Peter Kenton, DTM

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Paris

with Ginny Slocum, ACB, CL (interview)
and Laurent Quenoy, CC (video, photos)

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On a rainy Saturday November 11th, Peter Kenton opened his home and heart to us concerning Toastmasters

G: Peter, when and how did you start your Toastmasters journey?

P: The answer to that is easy. The hard part is going to be the brevity. The clarity is ok, but the brevity I'm still working on. I like to tell my daughter that 😊. It was in California -- I knew that my brother was a great fan. He became a DTM and he was an excellent writer, got book prizes and so on, but he could not *spea*k in public to save his face, and he knew it. So, when he moved out to CA in the 70's from the east coast, he joined Toastmasters. I was visiting with him in California when he said, 'Oh, we've moved to a different town, and we're going to our new Toastmasters club tonight, you wanna come along? I said, "Oh, of course I've heard that there's something called Toastmasters in Paris, which there was at the time (only one club at the time). So I went along with him, and they were very nice; they said "Oh, you live in Paris ! Ooh la la." (laugh). And I think they gave me one of those ribbons up there (numerous ribbons and trophies displayed in his large glass cabinet) for Best Table Topics answer. to Paris. I said, 'When I get home I'll make a point of finding out about this Toastmasters that I've heard of....' I knew it existed, but I had never had time to get around to it. So I did, and the first meeting I went to, which was the first or second year, in fact, they started meeting there, at the same restaurant we're still meeting at...that was about 27 years ago...Les Noces de Jeannette in Paris.

G: So what year did you actually begin?

P: I think it was '90 or '91....1990.....and the first meeting I went to I was *hooked!* I said to myself, "These people are brilliant. I could never do that!" That's a typical first-time Toastmasters reaction. Here I am, 27 years later, and I'm still enthusiastic...only a member of 4 clubs! 😊



G: That was my next question. Tell us about the number of clubs, the roles you've had in those clubs...

P: I set up in 1996 the first fully bilingual club we had in Europe. I was already in Toastmasters of Paris. We had already spun off one English-speaking club that still exists (that's Colleen Shaughnessy's club, Toastmasters 75) and I said, 'Well, do 10 speeches a year to get your Basic Manual, let's see, that's possible.....' So I signed up as a charter member of Toastmasters 75 and I did speeches for both clubs. Later, I had this crazy idea of setting up a bilingual club. In Quebec and in Mexico there were already clubs where one language was spoken at one meeting, and the other at an alternate meeting. But I wanted to have either language at every meeting. And, it worked! The Europeans has just spun off a new club, you know about that, Speak Up Toastmasters. Jérôme Le Mee is the moving force behind that, with Alain Meric and others...

G: So currently, you're a member of how many clubs?

P: Currently four. (Toastmasters of Paris, The Europeans, Speech Masters and Eiffelturm). Nathalie is giving me goo-goo eyes to sign up for Cervantes, the Spanish-speaking bilingual club in Paris At the time, The Europeans was the first, and for several years the only, really bilingual club. Today, we're being paid the compliment of imitation, and we've got bilingual clubs in Germany, Sweden, the Ukraine, Italy, Austria, Hungary, all over Europe...It works. We're no longer the only ones, certainly, but we were the first.

G: In terms of roles, have you done everything from Sergeant at Arms to President to Area Director?

P: Strangely enough, the only one I've never really done is VP of Education. The reason for that is because it's more time consuming than being President or even Sergeant at Arms or any of the other roles. I was Area Governor of Area 4 at the time. Back then, there were no divisions. There were clubs, areas and then directly the CCET, Continental Council of European Toastmasters, which is what Toastmasters provides for when you don't have enough clubs to make a district.

G: Didn't you tell me you were president early on in your TM career?

P: Since I had gotten 'bitten by the bug', they made me president the second year, which was a mistake, because it was too early. I did get my CTM, my Competent Toastmaster. Since then, it has become the Competent Communicator – hasn't changed much. I got it in a year—10 speeches in a year. I got it because I was doing speeches in 2 different clubs. Toastmasters doesn't care how many clubs or how many languages you do your speeches in. It's part of the rules.



G: Peter, what in your Toastmasters journey are you the most proud of? Something in particular?

P: Well, I'm basically too modest to blow my own horn, so I have to have time to think about it...😊 I'm proud of getting First Place in the European-wide Humorous Speech Contest in Munich in the 90's. I think I've got my nicest trophy up there (among his trophies in the cabinet) At the time, I decided to take the train instead of flying, so I spent the night in the train. The problem was, I was overprepared. I tried too hard, which can be a mistake. I was out there, in front of the lectern, communicating directly with the audience, when all of a sudden, my mind just went completely blank! White. A white wall. Completely blank, which in fact, is the nightmare of all speakers, even professional speakers. I had a moment, a split second of total panic. So I walked behind the lectern. I had the text, the script (which is NOT notes) of my speech on the lectern, and I just glanced at it and BOOM...it came back on! (I saw that happen once to a good speaker in California in front of 2,000 people. I felt bad for the guy because he was good, but it never came back for him.) So I came back, it clicked back on, and do you know WHAT? Everybody was rolling on the ground, laughing so hard, NOBODY noticed! Nobody even noticed!

G: Do you remember what it was about? 😊

P: Oh, absolutely! Sure, I do! I've got the texts, the scripts on paper, of all the speeches I've given over the last 27 years. Now, when a TME says, 'Oh, we've got somebody who cancelled out' (like a couple of weeks ago), "can you give a speech tonight?", I'm always ready. I go through my 3 big binders of speeches, check the dates, update the references, align them with current events. I can always improve and do better. That's Toastmasters.

G: What are some of your fun/funny Toastmasters moments?

P: There's one experience, but I can't tell you that because this is a family publication, isn't it? 😊 I did use that experience in a humorous speech, where I threw in a little reference to being able to satisfy a single woman, a fellow member's, *inner desires*. 😊 She went on to become a DTM, by the way. But she's not in France. (lots of chuckling)



G: Ok, let's move on...Let's skirt that subject, ha ha ha! 😊 Tell us about your Toastmasters of Paris Mardi Gras tradition, which I consider fun, and which makes everyone smile every year.

P: It all started a number of years ago, in the 90's, when I was looking for a subject for a humorous speech. I wanted to do a spoof on the Extremists, feminists who go too far, who go over the line, take things too far. That's counterproductive. So I wanted to do a spoof on extremist feminists, but I didn't want to step on anybody's toes. In talking with some of my middle-aged female friends, in their 40's and 50's, they told me, almost in unison, 'No one could ever do something like that except a woman.' So I thought, 'Oh, nuts. There goes my idea. Guess I'll have to think of something else.' But on the way home, I thought, 'What the heck! If I have to do it as a woman, I'll do it as a woman.' A challenge ! So I did my number in drag. 😊 I practiced for months – walking on spike heels without breaking my neck, costuming (clothes, makeup, accessories). I won the contest and went on to do the speech (at Area in Holland, and then at the CCET in Germany) in drag.

In 2006, John and Bethany got the idea to have a Mardi Gras meeting at Toastmasters of Paris with everyone in costume. Everyone was so happy with it that it became a club tradition. So ever since then, every year, I've followed through on the idea of doing it in drag. I've come as a Cowgirl (in her miniskirt), Catwoman, a Russian Cossack, a woman with her bustle, an angel, a devil, a witch....**(G: and we have photo proof! 😊 😊)** Every year I like to do something different and be as credible as possible, which isn't easy when everyone recognizes you! I even did research on how I could change the color of my eyes. But it was too complicated and too expensive, so I gave up on that.

G : Peter, what advice would you give to a new Toastmaster?

P: Think about why you want to join Toastmasters. Get your money's worth out of Toastmasters. Be persevering and stick to it! Don't fall into the trap of saying 'Ok, I've done my 10 speeches. Been there, done that.' And then leave. There's always something new in TM. You learn something new every day. By the time you've gotten through it, you'll find that you CAN learn something every day. You will conclude that you **CAN** teach an old dog new tricks. The day you learn something new is never a day wasted. Conversely, the day you do NOT learn something new, you might as well call the undertaker. 😊 So, Focus, Know what you want, Persevere. Go to all the meetings. Do it seriously, and you'll see that Yes, You Can! (find and learn something new). You'll also meet a lot of nice, friendly people from a wide range of backgrounds.

G: What about ExCom? Why join Excom?

P: The Leadership track didn't exist until the late 90's or early 2000. Public speaking is a means of learning leadership. The popular notion that you're either born a leader or you're not is false. It's a misconception. Leadership is something you can learn. Serving on the Executive Committee is one of the ways you learn. It's also the idea of service, which many are not comfortable with. Someone who speaks in public is there to serve the audience. What you're saying has to be interesting, resonant with the audience and something they want to hear. Everyone is thinking, "What's in it for me?"



G: What are your current TM goals? When did you get your DTM? What are you working on now?

P: In the late 90's we were aiming to go from a Provisional District to a full-fledged District. To get my DTM, I had to file my paperwork. Odile Petillot, who knew I was busy and lazy, shook me up, told me I had a deadline of 3 months and pushed me to get it done. So thanks in large part to Odile, I became a DTM in 1998.

Now, I'm focusing on giving back what I've learned and what I've gotten out of Toastmasters, passing on my enthusiasm. I saw this illustrated by my father, who was a teacher, very late in his life, in his 2nd, 3rd or 4th career. He became a university professor. He spent all his life with younger people, and had what I call the "Mr. Chips syndrome". That is, transmitting your enthusiasm for something, whatever it is, to younger people.

Stop me when I go overtime. Where's the red card? 😊😊 In that line, I'm active in the Youth Leadership Program. This is going to be our 2nd year. Colleen Shaughnessy and Bea Desper have taken the lead, with a group of teens between 14 and 18. There's also a group in Italy. It would be good to get something going inter-Division.

G: There will be a workshop in Milan on all that's happening with YLP in District 59. 😊

G: Last question, Peter. With all that you've described, your enthusiasm, experience, perseverance. What keeps you going? You're active in 4 clubs, involved with YLP, you host various clubs' Excom meetings in your home...It doesn't ever get old hat, routine?

P: You have to keep your sense of humor. Very important! We had one very enthusiastic member, who took himself too seriously. He's since disappeared. Now, this was already many years ago. He said, "You're so old, and so active and enthusiastic! "What's your SECRET?" I just couldn't resist. I leaned closer, and in a hushed whisper, confidentially, I said, "Sex." 😊 I couldn't resist that one. 😊 He took it in stride. That, of course, was a joke...

G: Hmmm, I don't know (laughter) Rumors fly sometimes....(more laughter)

P: Sense of humor, sense of balance, sense of what is appropriate, what is questionable. That often comes up. I had a discussion with Bob Mohl about that.

For example, is your speech appropriate to that audience, on that day, in that country? In France, I'll say till my dying day, I refuse to toast by saying Tchín Tchín because in Japanese it's a very dirty word and even today still shocks people and that's to be avoided. We have a choice for raising a toast. We can say prost, santé, skol, salud, cheers. We have a choice – plenty of words that are not offensive.

G: Do you have any regrets in regard to your Toastmaster journey? Something you wish you had done but didn't?

P: Yes, I was offered the position of Chairman (equivalent of today's District Director). I was too modest. I didn't rise to the challenge. I proposed two other people who I suggested were better qualified than I was. In hindsight, it was a mistake to turn it down. I regret it. It's a lot of work, but from a Toastmasters point of view, I would have learned more about leadership. 😊

G: Thank you for taking the time to share your Toastmasters journey with us, Peter. We're lucky to have you in Paris. Here's to an accomplished, committed Toastmaster with a great sense of humor! Cheers!

 [See all the photos here](#)

