

ACI Toastmasters Receives National Recognition

By: Connie Buehner

After only nine months, the ACI chapter of Toastmasters International received national recognition by being identified as a Select Distinguished Club; the second highest award given. It all began in September of 2015 when Ms. Sandra Barrett brought Toastmasters International to Allendale Correctional Institution. A group of inmates sat and listened intently as Ms. Barrett explained the concept. Toastmasters International is a nationwide "club" which teaches public speaking and leadership skills as well as offering an Educational track for its members. Most of us had never even heard of this organization and following a brief break, some men never returned to hear the rest of the presentation. However, it peaked the interest of approximately 22 men. They were onboard and ready to make this club a reality. Thus was formed The Allendale Toastmasters.



The men took the information and studied it intently, including studying Robert's Rules of Order to learn how to conduct a proper meeting. We elected Club Officers and went to work on our speeches. The projects in the book are very specific and detailed with the first project being an "Ice Breaker." In this project, members must write and present a speech that introduces themselves to the club and helps the other members get to know them. Many of the speeches given by participants thus far have been very powerful and honest. The men do not hold back as they begin to tell their stories. There have been many times when it has been impossible to listen to their speeches without pausing to wipe tears from your eyes.

We were all very nervous in the beginning and struggled to find our confidence. Everyone was clutching a handful of notes for dear life. From that beginning, most of us have already evolved to the point where we no longer even use notes. That is a tremendous sign of growth.

The men come together once a week to hold a meeting, which requires the fulfillment of many roles. Each role is assigned to a different person each week. First, of course, is the Toastmaster who acts as the emcee of the day's events. There is the Grammarian who tracks the use of any improper grammar and presents the "word of the day". People try to work that word into their speech whenever possible. There is a Joke Master, who loosens us up with a "joke of the day." There is also a Timer. Each speech has a time limit and the Timer lets the Speaker know where he is in his time window by holding up cue cards. There are as many Evaluators as there are Speakers and their job is to evaluate each speech. The Table Topics Master presents questions to random members who must then give a 2-minute speech on the subject. This teaches members how to think quickly on their feet. Last, there is the "Ah Counter" who keeps track of filler words used by the Speakers. This helps club members become aware of speech patterns they need to correct.



So many men have grown within this program. Men who were so nervous they could hardly speak now get up and handle any role assigned to them. Healing is taking place as well. Some members, at times, choke back tears during their speech. When we first began the club, the men set a goal to become either a Presidents Distinguished Club or a Select Distinguished Club. Because of the hard work and dedication of many, Allendale Toastmasters made Select Distinguished, and they did it in only nine months.

As the staff member assigned to work with Allendale Toastmasters, I can honestly say it has been a very rewarding experience. The men are so gifted. They write the most amazing speeches and deliver them with grace. It is an honor to work with these men.