

When Membership Leads to Friendship

Forming lasting relationships is an added benefit.

BY MOIRA BEATON, DTM

Most of us join Toastmasters to improve our communication and leadership skills, but sometimes we gain another kind of benefit—long-lasting relationships. For me, I gained a life partner.

Every January, Toastmasters clubs in Scotland hold a tribute, called Burns Supper, honoring the life of the national poet Robert Burns. I first met Neil MacLure, ACB, CL, in 2005 at such a ceremony, for which he “piped in the haggis”—he played the bagpipes in a procession where the traditional dish of haggis is delivered to the table. That was the start of a great relationship. Within six months of that meeting, I moved to Edinburgh where Neil lived and joined Capital Communicators. The club grew so much that together we founded a new club, Waverley Communicators. I joined Toastmasters to improve my speaking skills, but I didn’t expect it to change my life. I am not the only one.

Bonds that Heal

In April 2013, Sheila Fraser, DTM, a member of Linlithgow Speakers in Linlithgow, Scotland, suffered a brain hemorrhage. She lost her sight and her memory and was hospitalized for several months. Doctors said her chances of leading a normal life again were low. Six months later, Sheila represented her area at a division Humorous Speech Contest, presenting her speech “True Dream or Not True Dream,” about her illness and the months she spent in the hospital.

Today, contrary to expectations of the health professionals, Sheila has regained her sight and most of her memory, and has returned to work. A Toastmaster for 12 years, she credits much of her recovery to her network of friends in District 71. “Toastmasters visited me regularly when



Over time, the relationship between mentor Neil MacLure (right) and mentee Eu Jin Teh developed into a friendship.

I was in the hospital,” says Sheila. “They encouraged me to look forward by telling me I would get back to Toastmasters and deliver speeches again.”

Fellow club member and friend Jim Boyd, CL, was a regular visitor. He remarked that there “must be good material in here for a humorous speech.”

“It was a throwaway remark,” says Sheila, “but it was enough to trigger something in me.”

Creating the speech was part of her recovery. The project gave her something to focus on, and it helped her prove her abilities after the brain hemorrhage. And, since it was for Toastmasters, she knew she was doing it in a safe environment.

Sheila’s Toastmasters network also helped her husband, Stuart. He drove more than 100 miles every day to visit

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From left, Anthony Day, Michael J. Clarke and Phil Heath share laughs at a themed district event.

her in the hospital, but soon realized that with so many Toastmasters visiting her, he could plan his visits around theirs and spend valuable time catching up on tasks at work and home.

And when Eu Jin's sister Jo Way Teh, CC, arrived from Malaysia to study in Edinburgh, she too became a Toastmaster and friend. We met Eu Jin's parents when they visited, and a few years later,

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Mentors Matter

A different type of relationship helped Eu Jin Teh, ACB, ALB, develop from a shy, young engineering graduate to a confident speaker. He recounts his first visit to Capital Communicators: "The members made me feel so welcome that I wanted to come back," he says. "The thing that struck me was the confidence of the Toastmaster of the evening. When he told me he had been a member for less than a year, I thought, 'Wow, I want to be like that.'"

At the time, my partner, Neil, was pioneering the club's mentoring program. Eu Jin was immediately interested. "At home in Malaysia, there is a mentoring culture," says Eu Jin. "You are expected to have someone more experienced guide you." When Neil asked who he would like as his mentor, he chose Neil.

Over the next six years, a friendship developed between Eu Jin, Neil and me.

when my son traveled to Malaysia, he spent several days in their home.

Eu Jin says Neil helped him prepare speeches and encouraged him to take on meeting roles. Under his mentor's guidance, Eu Jin entered speech contests (some of which he won), and became club vice president education and then area governor. In 2012, he started a new club—Haymarket Toastmasters in Edinburgh.

Eu Jin's continuous development at Toastmasters made him more confident at work. It encouraged him to speak up at meetings and deliver seminars. It even helped him propose to his fiancé earlier in 2013, and he later used his Toastmasters skills to write his wedding vows.

"Toastmasters has helped me overcome years of conditioning in a traditional mindset where you are acutely aware of how others see you," says Eu Jin. "In Toastmasters, I've made many

friends, but they're different from my other friends. They acknowledge when you want to grow, push boundaries and do something challenging."

Close Friendships

We're not the only members who have formed close friendships. Known throughout District 71 as the Yorkshire gang, Michael J. Clarke, DTM; Anthony Day, DTM; Phil Heath, DTM; and Michael's partner, Gillian Caldicott, ACG, CL, have been friends since 2001.

Michael says Gillian wondered why he came home from Toastmasters meetings inspired and looking like he had a good time. She attended a meeting and enjoyed it so much that she joined too. Gillian and Michael met Anthony and Phil in Toastmasters, and now they're all best friends. In April 2002, Anthony and Michael chartered a club together, Leeds City Toastmasters in Leeds, United Kingdom.

When they are not organizing district conferences, chartering clubs or being involved in district matters, they meet socially every six weeks. They host dinner parties at each other's homes, go to the theater and generally support each other.

"Sometimes we've fallen out," says Michael, "but we always found ways to resolve our differences, as nothing has seemed important enough to break our friendship. To maintain that friendship, I'd say respect is the main thing—that, and having a great sense of humor."

As William Arthur Ward once said, "A true friend knows your weaknesses but shows you your strengths; feels your fears but fortifies your faith; sees your anxieties but frees your spirit; recognizes your disabilities but emphasizes your possibilities."

Whether you find a loved one, a friend, a business associate or a valuable support network, it's an unexpected gift, thanks to being a Toastmaster. **T**

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