

## Confessions of a Terrified Speaker

By Marla C. Maeder

My fear of public speaking started early, but thanks to Toastmasters, it is rapidly diminishing. It's been a long and bumpy ride, though.

My first public performance was at the tender age of 7 when my mother signed me up for the second-grade talent contest at Bunker Hill Elementary School in Houston, Texas. Every detail of that event is etched in my mind. I won't bore you with the details, but let's just say the song was short and I left the stage to polite, but tepid, applause.

My subsequent public performances were few -- including singing a solo in a small Baptist church for which I fortified myself by drinking half a bottle of wine.

My career as a writer saved me from public presentations. Mostly, I hid behind a computer, producing stories, publications and speeches for others. Occasionally, I'd get called on to speak at company meetings or conferences, which inevitably resulted in heart-banging, stomach-churning, nail-biting dread. Like a kid sucking a helium balloon, my voice would spiral higher and higher, faster and faster, until all sound evaporated into the stratosphere.

My fear of public speaking was getting out of control. Determined to beat this paralyzing panic, I visited a Toastmasters club near my office. As luck would have it, I was called on to give a Table Topics speech. It happened that the subject on this particular day -- September 12 -- was one I longed to talk about: "Describe your reaction to the events of September 11." The words came easily. I won the Table Topics trophy and felt a tremendous surge of confidence.

A month later I gave my Ice Breaker speech and was overwhelmed by the supportive, encouraging feedback of other Toastmasters. I couldn't wait to go to work on my next presentation. I've completed several speeches so far, and each time gets easier. I am deeply grateful to my fellow Toastmasters for creating an environment that nurtures such tremendous personal growth.

I only wish I'd found Toastmasters 20 years ago or, better yet, 40 years ago when I was 7! Eager to make up for lost time, I now find myself grabbing every speaking opportunity. Who knows? I may even work up a little song- and-dance routine.

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