

**Area 10 Interview Series: Colleen Dale, Slidell Toastmasters (January 2017)**

*How long have you been with Slidell Toastmasters?*

I have been with Slidell Toastmasters since 1986 (the club was chartered in 1980). I would describe myself as "*Never not a Toastmaster*," however, I did take a few breaks from the club during family illness and Hurricane Katrina.

*What brought you to Toastmasters International?*

When I was a teenager in the 1960s, I was introduced to Toastmasters by my aunt who brought me to a Toastmistress (all women) meeting a couple of times. I loved hearing the different speeches and even got to participate in Table Topics. It was a wonderful experience for a young person.

*How have you used Toastmasters International in your professional life?*

When I was in my 20s, I was a high school mathematics teacher and later a clerk and a computer specialist for the Federal Government. I realized at that time that Toastmasters could help me hone my teaching skills. My initial intention was to get a few tips from Toastmasters and then drop out. But the Slidell club – its members and environment – kept me going back. At that time, the club met every week, had 30 members, and a waiting list. I enjoyed the structure of the club and the camaraderie of the members. I looked forward to every meeting.



*Photo 1. Slidell Toastmasters from a local newspaper article [1988].*

Toastmasters improved my work performance as a teacher and as a clerk. When an Upward Mobility Program was announced within the Federal Government, I immediately applied and was selected. My experience as a teacher and as a Toastmaster helped me make an excellent score on the entrance test.

Because of that, I was asked to teach a few sessions on Test Taking Skills for other employees. A high level manager just happened to sit in on one of those classes and was impressed with my communication skills. The ability to communicate with different types of people was essential to my job, and I was able to use many of the skills learned at Toastmasters. I would often use a work situation at a Toastmaster meeting and ask for feedback on how to handle it. At that time, many people in the workforce were just being introduced to computer technology, and I was able to practice teaching employees who were fighting the new technology. Because I was able to apply a lot of the extensive practice and feedback from Toastmasters, I became a valued employee and received many promotions.

*Describe your Toastmasters International "career" to me, please.*

In 1987, after only one year with Slidell Toastmasters, I took on the President role, and I have been part of the club officer team since then. I have held every office, appreciating the skills learned from each one. I also competed in many contests during the early part of my Toastmaster career.



*Photo 2. Colleen with Contest Chair, Jim Chandler [2006].*

*What is your favorite officer role?*

Because I have been a lifelong educator, I have always enjoyed being the Vice President of Education (VPE). However, for the last 10 years, I have been the Vice President of Public Relations (VPPR) and until recently, the Treasurer. I still present educational sessions from time to time and enjoy doing that immensely. At present, the majority of the Slidell Toastmasters officers are new to their positions. I do try to help out whenever needed, offering advice or help, but always trying to step back and let others lead.

*What is your advice to "youngsters" with less Toastmasters International experience?*

I continue to enjoy club meetings, learning and hearing about other people and their ideas. Our club has a very diverse membership, yet we manage to have enjoyable and entertaining meetings with valuable discussion subjects. My advice to new members is to jump in as soon as possible and take on meeting roles and officer roles, even if they seem difficult. I also tell new members to not compare yourself to anyone else in the club. Often I am told, "*You look and sound so professional.*" And many members seem surprised that I come prepared with material to take on a role at the last minute, if needed. On several occasions, I have given a speech with only a few minutes warning. I have to explain to the newer members that this is not some sort of "magic trick", but a skill learned over many years and with lots of practice. I stress that they will get better, but the improvement will not happen overnight. With steady and continued effort, they can expect to get better with each speaking opportunity.

*What made you keep going with Toastmasters International?*

I try to encourage good feelings in members and guests and make them feel less overwhelmed. I tailor my teaching and mentoring to people's personalities and learning styles. I have often stayed over after a meeting to answer questions and offer advice and feedback. I truly enjoy working with members and the encouragement often goes two ways. I have worked with several new members who never thought they could walk to the podium and give a speech, but are now looking forward to giving presentations and taking on major meeting roles. I have also done some one-on-one coaching that has been very successful. These coaching sessions are very rewarding and fun. Also, seeing different members form friendships within the club is very rewarding.



*Photo 3. Current club members and guests [2016].*

*What are the differences in people that seek out Toastmasters International now, compared to some years ago?*

Many people think that Toastmasters is a class, and they are disappointed when they find out that it is a learn by doing organization. People tend to know WHAT they want, but they may not be willing to put in the time to obtain it. They are dependent on their phones and laptops for communication. The communication skills of younger people are very different than the older generations. Younger people have a different hill to climb, visually and verbally. Their attention spans are shorter, and they want instant gratification. One newer member remarked, "*I don't have conversations with people.*" I told him that his phone may "like" him, but it is not going to give him feedback. Another noted difference is that members do not want to take on officer roles or compete in contests. When I first joined Toastmasters, there were always several members running for each office. We also had members competing in all contests.

*What was your most memorable speech?*

I have several speeches that I still enjoy giving, but my favorite one was in a district contest. I had managed to reach the top four in that contest and presented an inspirational speech about Helen Keller. Helen overcame unbelievable odds, becoming blind and deaf as a baby, yet learned to overcome every obstacle presented to her, and later was the subject of the movie "The Miracle Worker". I have also enjoyed competing in many evaluation and Table Topics contests, but the Helen Keller speech remains my favorite.

*What is your motto in life?*

In recent years, I have had several health issues, but I still manage to attend almost every meeting every two weeks. My motto in life has become, "*Never Give Up*" and "*Never Pass up a Chance to Try Something New.*" Intelligence and persistence are imperative for moving forward in life. I encourage everyone to try things that scare them, and keep looking for challenges, even if some things do not work out. Also, everyone should give back something to their community. I have been a volunteer at a local hospital for 22 years, and I have learned and received more from the patients and families I encounter than I have ever given. There will always be "opportunities" that come to you. I am so happy that I found Toastmasters 30 years ago – it has opened many exciting doors for me!