

Raise a Glass to Basel's "Toasters"

by Abby Hilty

What is a "toastmaster"? Logic told me that it couldn't possibly be a person or appliance, which just happened to be exceptionally good at making the perfect piece of toast.

So I asked around. Most responses amounted to inwardly crinkled eyebrows and the words, "A what?" Getting a bit warmer, one man offered, "It's someone who makes a toast at a wedding or some other occasion." Finally, I struck pay dirt when I was told it was a member of the Toastmasters club. A club for public speaking.

Non-profit organisation

Founded in 1924 in Santa Ana, California, Toastmasters, a non-profit organisation, was intended to help people speak more effectively. Since its small start almost 80 years ago, Toastmasters International has, as one might say today, gone global, with over 8 500 clubs in 70 countries. Switzerland alone has 5 clubs, including Toastmasters of Basel.

Though Toastmasters focuses on improving public speaking skills, it's about much more than that. The young Basel club, established only 18 months ago, meets twice a month and has members from countries around the world, including Romania, New Zealand, USA, Switzerland and Italy to name just a few. And the reasons for joining the club are as diverse as the countries from which the members come.

Improve your English

As the entire meeting is held in English, it is a good forum for non-native speakers to improve their English. In saying that, it should also be mentioned that all club members have quite an advanced level of English. However, Toastmasters of Basel is not only beneficial to those working on honing their English-as-a-second-or-third-language skills, it is also an ideal atmosphere for native English speakers to meet other native speakers and indulgently immerse themselves for two hours in a little pocket of English, in what for them is normally a foreign country in which a foreign language is spoken.

In addition to fulfilling the desire to speak English, the club also serves as a place where one can meet people of numerous backgrounds. For those who are new to Switzerland, who may or may not speak German or Basel Dyytsch, or for those who have jobs in which they don't get to meet a lot of new people, such as nannies and homemakers, Toastmasters of Basel offers a very welcoming environment. Other reasons for becoming a member include getting over the common fear of public speaking; learning to better give and receive constructive criticism; exercising creativity; becoming a better communicator or leader in all situations.

Guest or official member

So how does one reap such benefits from Toastmasters? Firstly, anyone can attend up to 3 meetings as a "guest", that is, without paying membership dues (which are minimal). The next step is to become a "Toastmaster" by signing up as an official member, whereupon you receive manuals and pamphlets which explain the structure of the club and provide tips on public speaking and leadership.

During meetings, no one is forced to speak, although everyone is encouraged to. The evening begins with "Table Topics" which are short, thought provoking questions prepared by a designated person in advance. These topics run the gamut from politically serious to hysterically funny. A question is thrown out, and then someone is called upon to come up with a 1 to 2-minute response for all to hear.

In the second half of the two-hour meeting, 5 to 7-minute prepared speeches are made and evaluated by assigned evaluators. At the end of the evening, the whole group votes on the Best Table Topics Speaker, Best Speaker (from the prepared speeches) and Best Evaluator of the Evening.

All in all, there is a lot of laughter, clapping and fun in the supportive atmosphere of Toastmasters of Basel. So, to pleasantly forgetting the routine of the everyday grind, to learning to overcome a fear, to challenging and improving one's self and to meeting new people, I say bottoms up to Toastmasters of Basel!

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For more information visit the Toastmasters of Basel web site at: www.toastmastersofbasel.ch