

ACI inmates learn to use words well

The students in the Toastmasters program compose and present a speech every week, face evaluations by their peers and gain confidence



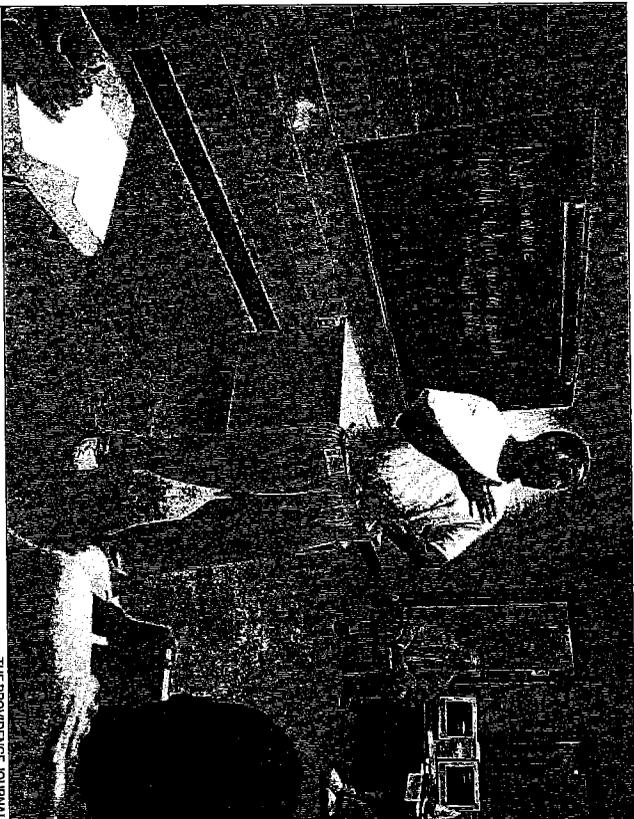
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"You have to be willing to accept change."

H. Anthony Guzman, 29

By JOHN HILL
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER
CRANSTON — Three months ago, a dozen inmates from the Adult Correctional Institutions' maximum-security unit gathered in a meeting room for the first of 12 weekly classes on speechmaking. They were asked to speak that night, spontaneously, about their favorite pet, favorite car or favorite food. Some went on for more than a minute, telling of their dogs — three of those four had pit bulls — the Red Sox' pitching woes or the Dallas Cowboys. Others barely made it past 20 seconds. One of them said: "I'm here for the good time. My favorite food is pizza. That's it."

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 Inmate Montrel Daniels gives his speech as the Toastmasters' public speaking group meets for graduation night. W.

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On graduation night three months later, three were left standing. Two others would have been there but were absent for a good reason: they'd been transferred to the less-strict medium-security unit.

They made five-minute graduation speeches on topics of their choosing, applying lessons of organization, pacing, eye contact and avoiding cliché words such as ah and so.

But the men who finished the program said they learned other things from the effort of composing and presenting a speech every week, and having that presentation evaluated by their peers and the program volunteers.

"Today, I actually think things out," said Montrel Daniels, who is serving a 4½-year term for second-degree murder. "That is the outcome of this action and how it is going to affect me, and vice versa."

Toastmasters is an international organization that uses public speaking as a way to teach communication skills and leadership. Members lead groups of participants in a cycle of speaking and evaluation by the group. There is no specific teacher; the members of the group analyze each other.

Edward Rodriguez, a former inmate/student who had returned to be a mentor for the group, said he'd taken to watching speech-making aficionados such as President Obama with a more practiced eye.

"I did Obama the other day," he said. "I counted his tabs and he did like 30 'tabs.'"

Ed Staruka, the leader of the Toastmaster group at the ACI, won't even use the word criticize to describe the evaluation process. People come to Toastmasters, he said, because they are afraid of stand-

ing before a group and speaking. The idea is to create an atmosphere of positive reinforcement to overcome those fears.

The importance of organization permeates the lessons. Each meeting is methodically scheduled, down to specific minutes. Skurka and the other speakers will mention the schedule, how far ahead or behind they are.

An obvious reason many of the inmates take the course is to improve their appearances before the Parole Board. Skurka said another inmate, who had been struggling with alcohol and drug problems, said he was going to use the confidence the course had given him when he rose to speak at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

For each session, participants are designated as timers and as counters of cliché words. Others are expected to come up with a word for the day and a thought for the day, as well as one clean joke to start the meeting. In the classes, there is no profanity, no nicknames or street names and no side conversations.

"It's about respect," he said. "Respect yourselves, respect the program, respect each other and we will respect you."

Corrections Department Director A.T. Wall, who sat in on the last class Wednesday night, said the thing that struck him most was the part of the meeting during which each inmate's presentation

was analyzed by the Toastmaster volunteers and fellow inmates.

"In the inmate culture, everything is about respect," he said. "If someone criticizes you, that is perceived as a slight."

"Some of it has to do with courage," Wall said. "A lot of guys in here put on their game face, show no vulnerability, no weakness, not acknowledging any fault. It's prison culture. The men who enroll in this, they're letting go, willing to let others see them be vulnerable. Willing to offer one another support is not necessarily the way that prison culture works. It takes courage to complete it."

H. Anthony Guzman, 29, who is nearing the end of a two-year sentence for breaking and entering, agreed that for an inmate to succeed in the Toastmasters program, he has to be open to examining himself. One reason so many dropped out was that they may not have been ready for that, he said.

"You have to be willing to accept change at 18, 19, 20, 25 — they're still kids. Their minds haven't progressed. Me, I'm tired, I'm sick of this."

Pablo Ortega, 30, is doing life plus five years for a murder conviction. His graduation speech was called "Past, Present, Future." He spoke about how his Ecuadorian parents brought the family to Rhode Island in search of a better life; about how he has

sisters who are graduating from college while he's in prison.

"When I was 10 to 12 years old," he said, "I was being part of a group that, in the back of my mind, I knew I was supposed to be with. I was a follower. I got shot in the back. I did not reflect. I did not wake up. And at 18, 19, I caught a murder charge."

"I am living in a situation where every single day is a consequence I have to deal with."

The Toastmasters organization has chapters across the country that run programs at the ACI; the sessions began in 2010 in the men's maximum-security unit. Since then, the group has conducted six in the men's unit and will include one in the women's unit this month.

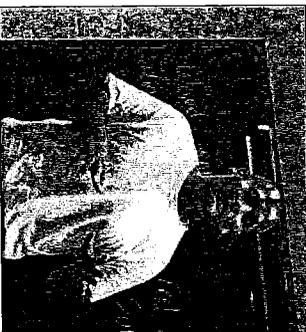
"The guys are very committed volunteers," Wall said of the Toastmasters coordinators. "They provide a connection to the outside. They are giving their time without compensation. They are motivated and sincere. These are qualities that strike home with the inmates. It gives them an authority that is very valuable."

Guzman, who is scheduled to be released next month, said: "I look inside of me and see myself not being afraid of going out there and going to that job interview. I have the opportunity not to be that person I have always been."

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Toastmaster Ed Skurka, right, congratulates Montrel Daniels after his speech.



Pablo Ortega, 30, gives his graduation speech in prison for a murder conviction.