Saluting Outrigger’s Toastmasters Club

Last week, I had the opportunity to spend a few minutes with the Outrigger affiliate of Toastmasters International, as they held their regular semi-monthly meeting at the OHANA Waikiki East hotel in Waikiki. I praised their efforts and shared my own thoughts on the importance of being able to communicate well in all sorts of situations.

The ability to speak effectively in public is a wonderful, important skill no matter what you do in life. Think for a moment about how much our lives and the course of history have been influenced and changed by individuals with great skills in oratory. Looking at recent history, the names of John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King immediately come to mind. The current U.S. President, Barack Obama, is an exceptionally good public speaker.

Some seem to be born with a natural talent as public speakers, but most of us have to work at it. Sadly, in these days of budget cuts, many educational institutions overlook or neglect helping students develop these skills.

That is where Toastmasters International comes in. It is a voluntary organization established in 1924 that now has 250,000 members in 12,000 clubs in 106 countries around the world. The organization’s website says, “No we don’t make toasters! [We offer] a proven—and enjoyable!—way to practice and hone communication and leadership skills. . . . Good communicators tend to become good leaders.”

Toastmasters alumni include such well-known, successful people as:
• Peter Coors – Chairman, Molson Coors Brewing Company
• Debbi Fields – Founder, Mrs. Fields Cookies
• Linda Lingle – Governor, State of Hawaii

We are lucky that a few dedicated members of our ‘ohana, including Laurie Hirata and Kathy Oyadomari, have worked hard for the past six years to develop and maintain the Outrigger Toastmasters Club in Waikiki and offer their fellow workers an opportunity to learn the basics of oral communications and, with practice, become polished public speakers.

Here’s how a couple of the Outrigger Toastmasters describe their experiences.

Laurie Hirata says, “I enjoy Toastmasters not only because it has helped me gain confidence in public speaking, but because we have members from different areas of our company. It has given me a chance to know people not only on a professional level, but on a personal level. We learn, we cry, we laugh, and more importantly, we support each other by making it a “safe” place to learn and grow in the art of public speaking. It really is the best use of any lunch hour! It’s a small commitment of time, but for me, it has yielded great returns. . . . You can call me a ‘Toaster’ any time!”

Kathy Hansberry adds, “I can’t tell you enough how much I enjoy the club. The warm welcome, encouragement, and support I experienced from each club member inspired me to join. Since then, I have learned a great deal about how crucial communication skills can be. Toastmasters has increased my confidence and awareness in public speaking. The best part though, is the friendship, respect, and fellowship that develop over time as members get to know one another through their speeches. A real ‘ohana connection!”

The club has been very successful. Seven members of the Outrigger Toastmasters Club are ranked as “Competent Communicators” (CC), and three have earned the title of “Advanced Communicator Bronze” (ACB).

During my visit with the Outrigger Toastmasters, I talked about some of my own experiences behind the podium. Without the benefit of prior training or a Toastmasters Club, for me, public speaking was, at first, a frightening trial by fire!

My first significant speaking opportunity came in 1958. I had finished my second year of medical school and was doing research in pathology at Boston’s prestigious Massachusetts General Hospital, when I came across a most unusual case. I was asked to research the case and present it to the hospital’s staff in the historic Ether Dome, the former operating room where, in 1846, ether had first been used to anesthetize patients undergoing surgery. A few days later, I was a very frightened and shaky young man, standing on the floor of the Ether Dome, flanked by two mummies and other medical memorabilia, looking up into the critical faces of the chiefs of many specialty departments and wondering if I was even going to get my first word out of my mouth!

In 1982, I had another shock when Outrigger was involved in a labor dispute after purchasing the Prince Kuhio Hotel. A mass of picketers, shouting and carrying signs, milled around outside. The lobby was filled with reporters and television cameras. Microphones were stuck in my face, and I was expected to calmly and intelligently comment on the chaotic situation!

That prompted me to seek training and develop some basic public speaking skills, which soon came in very handy. In the
late 1980s and early 1990s, the campaign to develop the Hawaii Convention Center near Waikiki became a hot issue. For several years, I carried a carousel of slides and a projector in my automobile at all times and gave hundreds of speeches to community groups.

I am pleased to say that several members of my family have followed that lead and are now excellent speakers. Dr. Chuck Kelley, CC, is an active member of the Outrigger Toastmasters Club.

The Outrigger Toastmasters Club offers many opportunities to our ‘ohana. Members meet on the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month from 12 p.m. to 1 p.m. in the Learning Center at the OHANA Waikiki East hotel. For more information, contact Kathy Foley, ACB (President), Laurie Hirata, ACB (Vice President Education), or Kathy Oyadomari, CC (Vice President Membership). If there is no club near you, visit www.toastmasters.org for information on how to start a club in your area.