

Alameda attorney headed to top rung of Toastmasters International

Group hones critical listening, thinking skills

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In a manner of speaking, Michael Notaro knows what he's talking about.

The 46-year-old Alameda real estate attorney can speak authoritatively about property law, but is armed with the right hand gestures and vocal verve to be equally convincing on just about any other topic. The ability of the longtime Toastmasters International member to wax eloquent has placed him in succession to lead the world's top society of speechmakers.

Last month, Notaro was elected third vice president of the organization's board of directors, a position that typically leads to an uncontested run for president. After Notaro made an impassioned two-minute speech about his love for the 84-year-old organization, club members elevated him to the post during an annual convention in Calgary, Ontario.

Longtime friend Nila Wong, a financial analyst for the budget office of Oakland's city administrator, said she was not surprised Notaro is climbing toward Toastmasters' top rung.

Wong met Notaro 12 years ago when she began attending meetings, during which members practice prepared and impromptu speeches and receive constructive feedback.

"He is a high-level speaker — whenever he gives a speech it is so hard to critique," Wong said. "He is always a model for all of us, especially for beginners."

Notaro joined the organization in his last year of college at University of California, Berkeley in order to get some tips on delivering a graduation speech.

He was immediately drawn to the club's efforts not only to improve a person's public speaking ability, but also to boost self-confidence.

"It's a program that helps people get over their shyness," Notaro said. "Being an effective public speaker leads to leadership positions. You gain experience you might not get in other parts of life."

Notaro also heralded the program's effectiveness in improving a speaker's listening and critical thinking skills. A 21-year member of Oakland City Center Toastmasters, which meets in downtown Oakland, Notaro has also helped to foster other clubs in the region.

A native of Chicago, Notaro moved to California to attend UC Berkeley, where he graduated in 1985 with a bachelor's degree in the political economics of industrial societies. After he realized that such a specialization didn't necessarily lend itself to a wealth of job opportunities, Notaro moved to Alameda and opened his own commercial real estate firm, Phoenix Commercial.

During his decade in business, he said he was often asked by clients to recommend a good real estate attorney. Sensing a need in the market, he decided to switch professional gears and attend San Francisco's Golden Gate University School of Law, where he graduated after four years of night classes.

Notaro, who is single and lives with a 7-year-old black Labrador mix named Betty, closed his real estate firm and opened his own law offices on Santa Clara Avenue three years ago. All the while, he has risen through the Toastmasters ranks, attending international conferences and mastering his own public-speaking skills.

As third vice president, Notaro will work on governance and policy issues for the organization, which is striving to beef up its international appeal. He said one focus for the organization — which has more than 200,000 members in 11,700 clubs in 92 countries — is helping members in other countries learn and practice English, though its manuals are also printed in other languages.

The position of third vice president typically leads to roles as second vice president, executive vice president and finally president. Although other members could technically contest him at each step, he said the organization's culture is such that the election for third vice president is the most competitive and typically leads to an uncontested rise to the top afterward.

Notaro said he believes he was chosen by colleagues to take the leadership position because he spoke passionately about how the organization helps members overcome obstacles and "discover abilities in themselves they didn't know." Wong, who is a member of Notaro's Oakland club, said he has demonstrated great commitment to Toastmasters.

"We feel so lucky that this is our home club and we can watch him grow," Wong said. "He has not changed. He is still the very same, supportive leader, and he wants to make sure everyone is a success."

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