

URL: <http://www.abqjournal.com/upfront/13223167751upfront08-13-09.htm>

Thursday, August 13, 2009

To the Arbiters of Speech, I'm Toast

By Leslie Linthicum

Journal Staff Writer

I gave a speech to a large community service organization in Albuquerque a couple of weeks ago and thought it went pretty well.

But after I stepped off the podium, a member of the club approached me and told me it was a terrible speech. Specifically, he said he had tired of counting the "ums."

I'll be perfectly honest with you. I spent the next 24 hours crying my eyes out. Then I, um, dusted myself off and got back to this cruel game called life.

My critic let's just call him Bob suggested I attend a Toastmasters meeting. And the next evening I was settled into a chair at the JB's Family Restaurant on Eubank with a cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie, surrounded by witty, eloquent, confident public speakers.

It turns out these members of Toastmasters Club No. 122 are also unusually dedicated. It is the oldest Toastmasters Club in Albuquerque, and, since it was founded in 1938, it has met every Tuesday evening.

Every single Tuesday evening. For 71 years.

The meeting I attended was the 3,713th in a row. And, as usual, Dick Arms was there, nibbling on some French toast and taking careful notes.

He has been coming for 45 years. Some people are slow learners, I guess.

But when Arms, a stock market analyst by trade, stands to give a two-minute extemporaneous talk about a photograph of a man with a big fish, his voice is booming, he talks with authority and he never falters into "ums," or "ers" or "uhs" or other fractious language that might derail his message. He commands the room.

"The whole idea," Arms tells me, "is to learn public speaking in a

friendly, relaxed atmosphere." That's why he joined in 1964. Since then, he has learned how to speak comfortably in just about any setting.

"There's no size audience I wouldn't get in front of," Arms says.

He keeps coming back because it's interesting to hear what other people are talking about and these people are fun. Tonight's speeches cover the description of an alternative to back surgery, an exposition on the computer as a communication tool, a history of the Archy and Mehitabel newspaper column and a haunting recollection of childhood memories of a mentally unstable boy and his beleaguered mother.

Try matching that entertainment on the screens of the Century 14.

And maybe that's why members not all of them every time give up two hours of their Tuesday, be it on Christmas or New Year's Eve or the Fourth of July and every Election Day, to practice public speaking.

When you think of Toastmasters, you might think of "the joke" or "the icebreaker," some glib trick intended to wow 'em at the company retreat or make you the hit of your nephew's wedding.

That would be missing the greater point of the Toastmasters' tradition.

"Initially, people go to Toastmasters because they want to improve on their public speaking skills," says member Antonio Pacheco. "I think what most people find is that there are other opportunities learning how to communicate and interact with people and learning how to listen better."

We live in a world of near-constant "communication." Twittering, blogging, texting and talking, talking, talking. It happens on cell phones and in offices and at movie theaters and on talk radio shows.

Most of it isn't really communication at all. It's yammering and maybe you've noticed this most people don't pay much attention to whether anyone is listening.

In the midst of all this blather, this meeting every Tuesday night seems more important than ever. It's about actually communicating, not just talking.

I'll end my toast to Toastmasters with a tip.

I asked Toastmasters grammarian Sabrina Strong where "um" falls in the hierarchy of public speaking sins. It's right up there at the top, she said, the worst among the "filler words" that speakers use to stall and stumble.

"Once you notice it," she said, "you can't stop hearing it."

Is that why someone would count the "ums" in an UpFront columnist's otherwise engaging and entertaining speech? Yes, she said, "because it's so irritating."

In Michael Erard's linguistics book "Um . . ." he makes the point that humans can't think and organize language while we're talking and that "um" and other fillers are actually signs of a careful speaker at work.

He also points out that um-less speech has only fairly recently been prized as smarter. For most of history, "um" has been amoral.

But if it annoys a grammarian, then "um" must go. What might suffice in its place?

The dedicated members of Toastmasters Club No. 122 have a novel suggestion: Nothing at all. A silent pause. These days, a truly welcome sound.

UpFront is a daily front-page opinion column. You can reach Leslie at 823-3914 or llinthicum@abqjournal.com.

[Back to story page](#)