

# Talking About Love

**Toastmasters couples around the world share their stories.**

**By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D., ATMS, CL**

*When I decided to join Toastmasters, my husband was thinking of coming too. But because he was already such a strong speaker, I asked him to hold back a month or so, until I could establish my own identity in the club. He never did become a member.*

Now, a dozen years later, my six closest friends in Toastmasters are three couples. This has caused me to wonder: What have I missed by flying solo? I decided to travel the globe – virtually – to find out.

## **Communicating in China**

First stop: China, home of District 85 Governor Rebecca Hong, DTM, who has seen many happy couples in the organization.

Rebecca says marriages between Toastmasters are a natural outcome of people sharing common interests and values. “It’s important for couples to share values, and all members share one important value: self-improvement,” she says. What’s more, while the communication skills learned in Toastmasters are essential in any relationship, they are especially important in a cross-cultural marriage like hers.



**Warwick Fahy and Rebecca Hong**

Rebecca lives in Shanghai, China, with her London-born husband, Warwick John Fahy, DTM, who was the founding chair of the China Territorial Council. The couple met at a club co-founded by Warwick in 2003. Soon after joining the club, Rebecca asked Warwick to be her mentor. They didn’t start dating until 2006, after working together on organizing their country’s first national Toastmasters Convention.

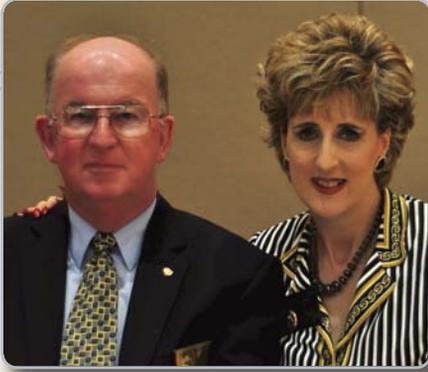
“I was one of his organizing committee members,” Rebecca recalls. “We had lots of interactions – including frictions – which ultimately led to the start of our love relationship the day after the convention ended.” They were married exactly a year later.

When their Peoples Square Club was founded, Rebecca says Warwick discouraged its members from dating each other, calling it unprofessional. He told the club’s co-founder, Samuel Jones, “Neither of us should date any girl in Toastmasters.”

On the couple’s wedding day, Jones, who served as witness, joked about this. Warwick replied: “I never said we shouldn’t *marry* Toastmasters!”

## **Sydney Sweethearts**

Next stop: Sydney, Australia, where Richard and Karen Stacey met in 1988. At the time, they were members of different clubs, both in District 70. Karen’s club had



**Richard and Karen Stacey**

wanted to join another club as a dual member, Richard suggested she join his.

One thing led to another, and three years later, the couple celebrated their honeymoon at the International Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. Karen went on to accompany Richard to Toastmasters events throughout the district as he progressed through the ranks to District 70 Governor. Ultimately, she also ended up serving as District 70 Governor.

“Our usual Saturday date,” she jokes, “was a quiet night for 100. But that’s okay. Most people join Toastmasters to improve their communication and leadership skills. I joined to find a husband, and I ended up marrying the district governor.”

“Toastmasters is a wonderful interest to share,” Richard adds. “It’s enabled us to meet new people and travel to different parts of the world as a couple. We also enjoy evaluating each other at club meetings. Our fellow members tend to look forward to this, and we do not disappoint them. Each of us finds a point for improvement in the other.”

The Staceys’ Toastmasters experience also works well long after the club gavel has sounded. They find that the “Oreo cookie” evaluation technique is useful when telling each other about negative feelings or discussing difficult issues. Says Richard, “It helps avoid unnecessary arguments and conflict in our relationship.”

### **Tigard Tenderness**

Oreo cookies also play a role in the marriage of past International Directors Dorothy and Carl Cottingham, who are DTMs and live in Tigard, Oregon. That’s because the major area in which Toastmasters membership has influenced the Cottinghams is in managing disagreements.

“Our evaluation training has been so firmly ingrained in both of us,” Dorothy explains, “that we tend to use the Oreo cookie method to resolve conflict. I might say, ‘You do these things really well. Could you have done as well as you did with the lawn and picked up the clippings too?’ It’s not that we don’t fight;

conducted a Speechcraft program and Richard, a district officer, was invited to present the certificates at graduation night. When Karen told Richard she

we do. But we can always stick to the point – just like in a good speech.”

The Cottinghams met when Carl was a division governor in 1981 and went to Dorothy’s club to install officers. Dorothy recalls that she admired his charm, energy and “twisted” sense of humor. They soon became good friends, but didn’t start dating until 1985. At their wedding two years later, nearly all of the guests were Toastmasters.

The Cottinghams say their relationship didn’t change anything for them in the club. “We’re both pretty confident of who we are,” Dorothy explains. “There’s no problem. We didn’t evaluate each other in the club setting for quite a while. But we supported each other and bounced ideas off one another.”

“A lot of people say, ‘Good grief, you’re always going to Toastmasters together,’” she says. “They want to know if we have a life! I tell them that my in-laws were square dancers together, and my parents had a cottage industry. We go to Toastmasters.”



**Dorothy and Carl Cottingham**

### **Cape Town Companions**

Craig and Lois Strachan, of Cape Town, South Africa, are both DTMs and joined Toastmasters together. Craig is the current District 74 Governor, and Lois is immediate past district governor.

Unlike the Staceys and Cottinghams, Craig and Lois rarely evaluate each other at meetings. “I’m not sure

if it was a deliberate choice,” Craig says, “or if it just worked out that way. But we do give a personal meeting evaluation on the drive home.”

Instead, the Strachans share Toastmasters activities outside their club meetings. “Having somebody to practice the speech with, a couple of times before the meeting, really helps,” Craig says.



**Lois and Craig Strachan**

“That’s especially true if they can hear the actual speech on the day we’re going to perform it.

“It also helps that Lois followed a similar leadership journey to the one I’m on,” he adds, “and has been a wonderful mentor and sounding board for me. District leadership takes a lot of commitment, and it would have been far more difficult for either of us had the other not been as involved as we are.”

As for whether or not Toastmasters skills translate into their marriage, the jury is still out. “Hmmm,” Craig says, “that’s difficult to assess. We do generally communicate well with each other, but we are, after all, just human.”

### Lake Forest Love

It never occurred to Cliff Shimizu, of Lake Forest, California, to ask his wife to join his club.

“Ann is very outgoing and didn’t seem to have a problem speaking in front of other people,” he said. “Besides, Toastmasters was *my* thing, sort of like golf or bowling with the guys.”

Then, one day, the topic of Toastmasters came up, and Ann mentioned that she could never do “that Toastmasters thing.”

“Without realizing who I was talking to, I automatically launched into my club recruitment spiel about how wonderful Toastmasters is. Ann got very excited and said, ‘Really?’ At that point, I snapped out of auto-pilot and thought, *uh, oh ... what have I done?*”



Cliff and Ann Shimizu

Suddenly, Cliff had to share his “comfortable Toastmasters world” with his wife. Not only that, but the VP of Education assigned him to be Ann’s mentor. The experience was so earth-shattering for him that he wrote a humorous speech referring to his wife as the asteroid that changed his world.

“From time to time, I make jokes about the hazards of being in a club with my wife,” he says. “But it really has been a great experience for the two of us. We keep each other on our toes and sometimes have friendly (more or less) competitions for reaching various Toastmasters goals. It has also given us something that we can both relate to. Before she joined, she could

never truly understand or appreciate many of my tales about Toastmasters.”

Being in a club with your spouse can be successful, Cliff says, as long as the club is a good fit for both parties. But if the time, structure or personality of the club doesn’t match husband and wife, equally, he recommends separate clubs.

### Can You Find Love Faster as a Toastmaster?

So if you’re looking for love in Toastmasters, run, don’t walk, to your next club meeting, district conference or even the International Convention taking place this

August in Palm Desert, California. Spencer Fawkes even chose a Toastmasters setting as the site of his marriage proposal. He and Sue Milledge first met in Toastmasters, in March 2002. When it came time to pop the question, he did so in particularly dramatic fashion.



Spencer Fawkes and Sue Milledge

In November 2009, at the District 42 Fall Conference in Grand Prairie, Alberta, Canada, Spencer – under the guise of presenting Sue with an award – got down on bended knee with a ring and proposed to her at the District Governor’s Ball.

The couple, who are members of the Valley Echo club in Cochrane, Alberta, Canada, tied the knot in December 2009. (And adding to their Toastmasters togetherness, Spencer and Sue received their second DTMs together at the District 42 Spring Convention.)

If you’ve already found your mate in life and plan to invite your outspoken spouse to your beloved club, heed the advice of Cliff Shimizu, who recommends waiting until you have a few meetings under your belt, so you don’t get overshadowed.

In fact, now that I’ve been a member over a decade, I’m just about ready to invite my husband. 

**Caren S. Neile, Ph.D., ATMS, CL**, is a faculty member at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton and chairs the National Storytelling Network. She has presented at two Toastmasters International Conventions. Contact her at [cneile@fau.edu](mailto:cneile@fau.edu).