Park Center Toastmasters - First Speech

Today, January 29, 2014, I presented my first speech to the Park Center Toastmasters group. This is actually the second TM group I have joined, the other the Old Town Toastmasters, also in Alexandria. So far I have served as grammarian and time keeper. I officially joined the Old Town group on January 27 and my membership at Park Center will take effect at the beginning of February. I have included a copy of my get-to-know-you speech.

Madam Toastmaster, Members and guests, Good afternoon.

**Opening**

Today I’m going to break the ice by sharing about myself and offering some life impressions that have stayed with me and shaped who I am. I begin with a memory from my childhood, then a summer job in Alaska, and then an overseas internship experience in rural China. All three express the concept of community in different senses and all three emphasize the spirit of **togetherness**. The title of my ice breaker is: **Perspectives of Community**

**Highlight 1**

My childhood was spent in a National Historic Landmark—the Chautauqua community of Bay View, Michigan. At the turn of the twentieth century, Chautauqua assemblies formed an educational and cultural circuit, allowing small communities to experience the cultural opportunities found in urban areas. As part of this community, every summer my family and I made the pilgrimage north from Florida to this collection of 450 Victorian cottages, to reconnect and rejuvenate. It seemed everyone in the community knew not just my immediate family, but my grandparents and great grandparents.

One summer ritual, typically on rainy days, was to paint rocks and weave potholders with my brothers and sisters and sell them door-to-door for seventy-five cents apiece. We walked into our neighbors’ houses (which were always unlocked) without feeling the need to knock or ring a doorbell.

In retrospect, our neighbors were likely surprised, but as children it was such a natural illustration of the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child.” In this unique upbringing, the concept of *community* was internalized at a young age and became an integral part of my character.

**Highlight 2**

Later on, as a university student, for the adventure-of-it, I drove to Alaska with my college roommate while on summer break, where I discovered an entirely different community. A childhood friend had moved to Alaska some years prior and suggested we apply for summer jobs where he worked, at the Great Pacific Seafoods Company in Whittier—a town only accessible by a three mile tunnel and in which everybody lived in one 14-story building, most of whom worked at the fish factory.

 My suspicions were piqued when the supervisor said “You must be desperate if you want to work here” but perhaps against better judgment I took the job. I was immediately thrown on the “slime line”—where 100,000 pounds of salmon were processed each day for up to 100 hours a week. Each worker had a specific task which was repeated again and again. In my rubber boots up to my knees, gloves to my elbows and a hat I was assigned the position of gutting the fish. By the time they arrived to me, they were missing their heads and were sliced open. At first my technique was sloppy, but I quickly learned how scoop out several pounds of fish guts in one clean stroke—forty-four times a minute.   **Do the motion**

By the end of the first day, the smell became unnoticeable, even though I was covered in fish guts from head to toe. Some nights I fell asleep before I could even change out of my work clothes. I shared a bed with my friend who recommended the job, and my college roommate slept on a blanket on the floor. Our apartment was on the top floor of the tower. My childhood friend who we stayed with was a guest in the apartment, living there in exchange for cleaning. The apartment never was cleaned.

As could be imagined, the factory was a mishmash of characters from around the globe, and the only other students were a cohort of Koreans on a “*cultural exchange*” project. I immediately noticed that I had a knack for understanding their broken English and assumed an unofficial role as liaison between the management and the Koreans, as neither could understand the other. The friendships that I forged in those short months continue to this day.

**Highlight 3**

I am continuing to understand the meaning of community, what it means for me personally, and what it means for others. In the summer of 2010, I interned at the IFChina Studio Participatory Documentary Center, a non-government organization in China’s Jiangxi province. This wasn’t the China of the Great Wall and the sleek skylines and smog of Beijing and Shanghai. In the villages of Jiangxi province, water was pumped from a community well, large snakes roamed the night, and we bathed in a river. This was the birthplace of the Chinese Red Army under Mao, and the IFChina Studio promoted local culture and civic awareness by documenting the lives of ordinary citizens with video and photography, especially the children and elderly who have been described as “left behind” as a result of urban migration. For some of them, it was the first time they ever had their photograph taken.

One day while distributing rice for the “left behind,” we met an older woman with six chickens and two children running outside in the dirt. The house was a potpourri of items, artistic in its medley of stained couches, knives, spoons, and pictures, all salvaged from the dump. Everything in her life had been given a new life, including her own children, who had been abandoned before she found them and took them in.

**Conclusion**

Each of these highlights—going door-to-door selling painting rocks and potholders in the Victorian summer community of Bay View, cutting up fish in the company town of Whittier, Alaska, and listening to the stories of the left behind in Jiangxi, China—captures a different spirit and sense of ’community’ and has been an integral part of shaping who I am today. Sometimes community is experienced in remote villages, far removed from the beaten paths in our lives. Other times, it is with our sisters, brothers, friends and family.

In one Chinese village, as we delivered rice to a widow living alone, she reminisced with us about her deceased husband. A message came to my mind, and through interpretation, I asked her if she had **dreamt** of her husband recently. She did—in fact, the night before. In her dream, they were floating on the waves of the sea, **together**.  As you can see, the stories of our lives are not experienced alone, but shared. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you, to be a part of the Toastmasters community.

Madam Toastmaster.

Presented 1/29/2014 to Park Center Toastmasters

Alexandria, VA