

Toastmaster's a success in Mountjoy

by Ian MacNeill

"What is it like being a Father in prison?"

"If you could change places with anyone in the world, who would it be?"

"If burying a 100 year time capsule what would you put in it?"

"Who inspires you?"

"Is culture important?"

"At a one-to-one meeting what would you say to your old school principal ?

These are just some of the topics that toastmasters participants in Mountjoy have shared their opinions on at their twice monthly Toastmasters meetings.

If you ever attended a Toastmaster's meeting you'll know it's about becoming more comfortable with public speaking. The meeting is broken into two parts, namely, topics and prepared speeches. A topicsmaster is selected in advance for each meeting, offers topics to the members. When selected at random a member is invited to speak on that topic for up to two minutes. This is to encourage and learn impromptu speaking and to build confidence in speaking without preparation before a group – it could be in a job interview, a few words at a family gathering or a review meeting with the prison Governor and officers!

After the toastmasters have had their fill of tea and Mountjoy bakery scones the second half of the meeting begins and three members deliver their prepared speeches. Up to seven minutes is allowed for each speech and a Toastmaster's manual guides the members through a programme of eight stages to a Speechcraft Certificate.

Ultimately the success of the toastmasters programme is down to the prisoners but from the outset Governor Whelan showed his commitment

to, and belief in, the programme by appointing two ISM officers to liaise between the outside Toastmaster mentors and the prisoner members. Following the initial demonstration meeting the members took over most of the leadership roles of Toastmaster (chairman of the meeting), Topicsmaster (selects the topics), Welcomer (greet everyone on arrival), Timer (times the speeches) and General Evaluator (gives their feedback on the meeting). Following some training the members also took on the speech evaluation role where one member reviews the other member's speech highlighting the good points and pointing out areas for improvement.

The mentors' objectives to make themselves redundant and have the club run under Toastmaster rules by the prisoner members have been largely completed within the 18 months the club has been running. Commencing in August 2012 and meeting once a fortnight from 5 – 6.30PM the club has heard 76 speeches with 58 individual prisoners overall having attended meetings and 151 separate leadership roles having been carried out.

The willingness of members to take on leadership roles has been notable. Managing a room of 20 fellow male prisoner members can be challenging but members have adapted very quickly and with huge enthusiasm. It's noticeable how members help and encourage one another, some even taking on mentoring roles themselves.

There are lots of reasons for joining toastmasters – improved confidence, listening to great speeches, sharing your opinions about issues, an entertaining evening but one of the toastmasters put it best when asked the topic

"What has attending Toastmasters in prison done for you?" – "It makes me feel better about myself"
 Toastmasters in Mountjoy Men's Prison is run by the Dublin Toastmasters Club which can be contacted at info@dublintoastmasters.ie