

Neophyte public speaker hopes to be toast of the world

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Rob Nickel first bowls you over with his exuberance, and while you're picking yourself up off the floor, there he is, arms spread, offering his warmth.

Nickel is an enigma, wrapped in one wild and crazy guy. He's also the next world Toastmaster champion. At least, that's what he says. "I'm going to win, that's all there is to it."

The annual competition started in 1938 and the title is usually captured by an American, though in 1960, Kitchener's Glenn Carroll won. Nickel plans on being next.

Who can argue with such determination? Apparently not many because the neophyte Cambridge Toastmaster (he joined the club last year) has thus far won first place at four levels: club, area, district and, on June 12, the regional championship in Lansing, Mich., competing against speakers from Ontario, Quebec, New York state, Ohio and Michigan.

That win was a first for the Grand River Toastmasters, which is one of three clubs in Cambridge. There is also one club in Kitchener, six in Waterloo and one in Stratford. Internationally, the club spans 80 countries with a membership of 195,000. Nickel uses the club's resources and expertise to hone his skills, with hopes of becoming a professional inspirational speaker.

"I love speaking in front of people," said Nickel, who runs a web design and DVD production company from his Cambridge home. He is also part of two local speakers bureaus: Up Front Ontario and Speakers for Students.

In August he'll exercise that performance muscle at the world championship in Reno, Nev., where the father of two will be pitted against eight top contenders from around the world. And he hasn't even written his speech yet.

Nickel used the same speech for all the preliminary rounds, but the world competition requires fresh material.

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RECORD STAFF

Rob Nickel won a regional competition at the Cambridge Toastmasters Club, qualifying him to compete at the world championship in Reno, Nev., in August.

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A former OPP detective sergeant, Nickel spent years travelling to police jurisdictions, training fellow officers. It was here, in front of an attentive audience, he caught the public speaking bug. More than just the speaking, he just has so much to say and finds inspiration all around him, from the cranky cop who gave him a speeding ticket to a stand of mature oak trees in Michigan. Messages are everywhere and once a seed of an idea embeds itself, he's off and running, coming up with metaphors and wisdom for his audience.

The traffic cop, he said, showed how some people take little joy from their work and that a simple change in attitude can make a difference to personal happiness. As for the the ancient oak trees, certainly they are impressive -- more so than a puny human -- but the trees can't change the world, he said, adding "I can."

So much of life, Nickel said, is about attitude and surrounding yourself with positive people. During his 14 years as a cop, he worked in the child pornography division, much of that undercover.

"People would come up to me, other cops, and say 'I couldn't do your job,' " he recalled. "But I thought, if I could stop one (pornographer) I know I could make a difference." It was that attitude that made him think he had something to share with a larger audience and he left the force to give himself more flexibility in his career.

The world championship won't be an easy win, despite his self-confidence. Judges look at attitude, grammar, body language, delivery, voice inflections, importance and originality of the message.

"There's nothing they don't look at," he said.

Though brimming with self-confidence, there is one thing that scares the heck out of him -- the clock.

"If it's under four and a half minutes, you're disqualified, if it's over seven and a half minutes, you're disqualified," he said. "The hardest to deal with is not going over."

Some audiences find particular points hilarious and seconds past before the laughter dies enough for the speaker to continue -- precious time that can't be recaptured.

"My last speech was on belief in yourself," he said. "The reason I did it was because I was going to the world championships. . . . I want to practice what I preach."

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