



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Mary Cheyne was the winner of a "Humorous Speech Contest" sponsored by Toastmasters International. She gives speeches about how to be a good public speaker.

G FORCE | MARY CHEYNE

Speaking of confidence

As a senior trainer for a software company in Boston, Mary Cheyne talks to people one-on-one every day, teaching them how to use a Web-based application designed for recruiters.

But Cheyne, 37, has also begun giving speeches at colleges and before youth groups where she extols the power of public speaking — a message enhanced by her recent victory in a "Humorous Speech Contest" sponsored by Toastmasters International in a district that covers eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Cheyne, who still speaks in the unmistakable accent of her native Australia, revised her 900-word speech two dozen times before settling on the final version. Her topic? The way many people quail at the prospect of giving a speech — including, at one time, herself.

Q. Did you ever suffer from a fear of public speaking?

A. Yeah, there was definitely some fear there. One of the reasons I joined Toastmasters was to get that confidence back. I was a software developer for seven years back in Australia. I used to sit behind a desk all the time and not need to talk to anybody. It made my personality retract. Learning about public speaking is allowing my natural self to come back. My goal was to get back to not being afraid.

Q. Tell me about the speech that won the contest.

A. I told the story about how when I first started public speaking three years ago, it was so scary to me that I might as well have been bungee-jumping or sky diving or, even worse, driving in Boston.

Q. How do you put together a speech?

A. I'll gather a test audience — my friends, my co-workers — and rehearse my speech. Do people laugh at it? If not, I'm going to change it 'til I get a good laugh. The power of iteration, that's what I like to say.

Q. What's the biggest mistake people make when it comes to public speaking?

A. It's not so much a mistake; it's more of a phase people go through, which is focusing on themselves. I always say there are two voices in public speaking: the one in your mouth and the one in your mind. A lot of people think, "The audience is my enemy; the audience is scary." The audience is *not* your enemy. Your biggest enemy is your own mind. You need to let go of your judgment and focus on your message. Public speaking is a tool. Once you become proficient at it, the question is what can you do with this tool?

Q. What's next for you?

A. Toastmasters runs an international speech contest in the spring. That would be a different speech, more serious. My goal is to win the world championship of public speaking.

DON AUCOIN