

Seminar offers public speaking tips

BY CHRISTINA LEVERE ReminderNews



The first thing you notice about Elizabeth Trendowski and Wayne Botha is that they are quick to smile. Their affable manners make it easy for them to convince people to try things they otherwise might not do...like getting up in front of a group of strangers and pretending to be Paris Hilton.

The impersonation exercise was just one of the activities on tap for “Panic to Power: Swift and Simple Speaking Strategies Anyone Can Use,” a free seminar held April 10 at the Cragin Memorial Library. The event drew a wide range of people, from school teachers to business professionals, looking to beat their public speaking jitters.

“Public speaking is a skill that anyone can learn if they want to,” Trendowski said. “People think that they should be able to speak well because talking is so natural, but public speaking is an art, and arts need to be practiced.”

Trendowski has been in the business of giving presentations for more than 20 years – first as a safe service trainer in the hospitality industry and more recently as a public speaking trainer. She’s president of the Smart Training Institute and author of “From Butterflies to Speaking Highs.”

Botha has authored “Dodging the Bullet Points – 5.5 Steps to Presenting with PowerPoint” and is co-author of a successful CD, “Panic to Power.”

The two are also active members of Toastmasters International (Botha is area governor), a nonprofit organization that offers people a way to hone their communication and leadership skills by getting together

for speaking practice. The group even hosts public speaking competitions.

When Trendowski and Botha asked the group why they were so afraid, answers varied. A businesswoman who gave presentations to colleagues noted that she often lost her train of thought while speaking. Another woman said she worried that others were judging her. A man said he rushed through his speeches and forgot to breathe.

“Everyone is afraid of messing up and being embarrassed,” Trendowski said. “Even me. I didn’t start off great.”

Ironically, her worst experience wasn’t in front of hundreds of people (she said the number of people doesn’t make it the most difficult), but was during a publicity tour. She completely froze. For the television interview, the producer had to dub in her voice. For radio bits, the producer used sound clips. “It was very embarrassing,” Trendowski said, laughing.

Botha had a similar experience, although his public speaking gaffe was only in front of two people. “I didn’t know the material,” Botha said. “I just froze.”

Indeed, there are many reasons why public speaking can be a nerve-wracking experience, and Trendowski and Botha were armed with tactics to help even the meek become speaking mavens. They use the word “panic” as an acronym for “preparation, activity, needs of the audience, interesting and closing.” During the seminar, Trendowski elaborated on each point, using group activities such as having everyone stand to make note of body language, for emphasis.

“No slouching. Make eye contact,” Trendowski coached the group. “Don’t draw attention to your mistakes.”

By the end of the evening, everyone seemed to have conquered at least some of their jitters. People joked, laughed and offered their own public speaking anecdotes. Despite the progress, Trendowski admitted it will take more than one evening to become a public speaking pro.

“It took me years of practice,” she said. “But I enjoy it. Public speaking is a real passion for me.”

It’s also a skill: She’s participating in an upcoming Toastmasters Division Championship at the Colchester Town Hall. She admitted to the group that even she was nervous.

“But I’ll be fine,” she said. “Because I’m not afraid to fail.”