

TALK LIKE ME

Stuttering doesn't stop entrepreneur from public speaking success.

By Garret Garrels, CC

"Do they all t-t-talk like you in Montana?"

That jerk in the back of my college literature class wasn't the first one to make fun of my speech impediment. Ever since I

even changed the pronunciation of our last name."

I always wondered why the rest of my family pronounced Garrels like "Charles" and we said Garrels like "barrels." The latter was easier for my dad to pronounce, so instead

As hard as it may be to speak through our fears, trying to quietly fit in is not the way to stand up, stand proud and stand out.

was old enough for public school, I dreaded the first day of class. On that day the teacher would ask the students to "stand up and say your name and where you are from." I feared doing this because people made fun of me every time I opened my mouth. I never had the courage to address the hecklers. Instead, I would sink back in my seat and pretend my self-confidence didn't shatter.

Stuttering ran in my dad's side of the family, and he told me, "Garret, I've carried this problem on my back for my entire life, and because of it I

of stuttering his own name, he just changed its pronunciation. He even changed the spelling of my first name: Most people spell the name with two t's at the end, but I spell it with only one. When my parents chose my name, my dad said, "My son won't have t-t-two t's in his name."

The impediment that ran in my family may have influenced the spelling of my name, but I had to do more than just pronounce it correctly to establish a career as a professional speaker. Toastmasters helped me find the definition of my name.

A Burgeoning Business

Despite the classroom critics, the business I started while still in college—a women's fitness boxing program called Pink Gloves Boxing—grew rapidly, soon gaining international recognition. When a lesser populated state like Montana, my home state, produces an internationally recognized company, local schools and universities often ask the owners to speak to their students and share their stories. I felt my abilities as a spokesman for Pink Gloves Boxing didn't measure up.

My business partner, Nick Milodragovich, and I were invited to a Toastmasters meeting that quickly earned a spot on our weekly calendar.

My Ice Breaker seemed more like an iceberg. Just the thought of it chilled my blood. But it was the warm atmosphere of my club that really broke the ice ... not my speech. I stuttered in it, but Tonna, our club president, said in her evaluation: "You are a really funny speaker. You should compete in the Humorous Speech Contest." The feeling of someone laughing with me must have caused me to temporarily forget

Garret Garrels, CC, the founder of Pink Gloves Boxing, started competing as a speaker after joining Toastmasters.



all the times people laughed at me; I took her advice.

I stammered on to win first place at the district level of that contest—at least, I thought I won. I overheard one of the judges say, “Garret actually took second place, but the lady in first went over time.” My first-place trophy lost its shimmer.

A Revelation

Back at the hotel room, I tossed myself onto the bed in a 200-pound pile of self-pity. I felt broken. It was at that moment that I realized the true importance of the Toastmasters speech contests. The trophy didn’t matter; it wasn’t real. I became a better speaker in the process. That was real. The knowledge and skills I gained from competing were something that no one could ever take away.

Not only did I learn how to communicate with an audience, I learned how to communicate with myself. Piece by piece, I picked up the self-confidence that had at one time shattered on the classroom floor. I gained the courage to share my

message regardless of my impediment. I stopped competing to win and started competing to grow.

In 2011 and 2012, I was fortunate enough to advance to the semifinals of the International Speech Contest. I didn’t win the contest, but I did grow. I view the speech competitions as the practice field for the most important game in life: communication. Some people play the game while others watch. If you’re looking to grow as a speaker, consider competing in your club’s next competition. You may not win, but I guarantee you won’t lose.

I may never lose my stutter, but through Toastmasters and public speaking I have found an outlet to help me improve. Perhaps my friend Leys Geddes, immediate past chair of the British Stammering Association, said it best: “Very few adult stutterers ever overcome the condition entirely, but we must still be prepared to speak *and* stutter in public. Society realizes, for example, that limping is simply a sign of difficulty with one’s leg, not a sign of a personality defect; so it should be with stuttering.”

Whether you have a speech impediment or just a fear of public speaking, you have a message that the world needs to hear. As hard as it may be to speak through our fears, trying to quietly fit in is not the way to stand up, stand proud and stand out. I’d like to end this article by saying something I never had the chance to say to my college heckler: My name is Garret—with one t—Garrels, pronounced like “barrels.” And yes ... they all talk like me in Montana. **T**

Garret Garrels, CC, is a member of the Helena Toastmasters club in Helena, Montana. He advanced to the semifinals of the Toastmasters International Speech Contest in 2011 and 2012; in 2011, he finished in second place in his semifinal contest. Garret is the author of the book *Loops 4 Life*, the founder of Pink Gloves Boxing and a professional humorous speaker. Learn more at garretgarrels.com.