

# The Youth Leadership Program

# Rocks!



How young people around the globe become confident presenters.

BY CHRISTINE CLAPP, DTM

Do you ever wonder where you would be now if you had Toastmasters experience when you were a kid? Unquestionably, building confidence and developing public speaking and leadership skills are worthwhile at any stage in life. But imagine honing those skills as a teenager, or even younger.

This is a question that Aimee Ennis McLoughlin will never ask herself. McLoughlin, a 16-year-old Irish student who participated in the Toastmasters Youth Leadership Program (YLP), reflects on her experience: "When I started in the program I was nervous. Each time I stood up to speak, my confidence grew, and it's all thanks to Toastmasters!" Imagine the cascading benefits she will reap in her academic, professional and personal endeavors during her teen years, and into adulthood.

Although membership in Toastmasters is limited to individuals 18 and older, teenagers like McLoughlin can gain confidence, polish their communication skills and develop leadership abilities through the





*Toastmasters and professional educators join forces around the world to mentor students younger than 18 through the Youth Leadership Program, including the students shown here, in 1. Hungary; 2. South Africa; 3. Ireland; and 4. The United States.*

## LEADERSHIP

YLP. Sponsored by existing Toastmasters clubs, the eight-session workshop helps youth, usually middle- or high-school students, “develop their communication and leadership skills so that they may become tomorrow’s leaders in business, industry and the community,” as described in Toastmasters’ Youth Leadership Program brochure.

In keeping with the openness and inclusivity that characterizes Toastmasters clubs, YLP is open to all young people, regardless of any prior leadership experience, achievement or other factors. Like club meetings, YLP sessions are held on a regular basis for one or two hours per session. The sessions have the components of a typical club meeting—an agenda, parliamentary procedure, an emcee, impromptu and prepared speeches, and evaluations.

The following is a snapshot of communities across the globe—in Hungary, South Africa, Ireland and the United

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States—that have successfully spearheaded and customized the YLP so that youth can reap the benefits of Toastmasters long before they reach adulthood.

### Hungary

A couple of years ago, in Godollo, Hungary, Toastmaster Marya Kaska launched what she believes is the first YLP workshop conducted in that country. She partnered with Zoltan Szoke, an English teacher at Premontrei Gimnazium grammar school. Together, they conducted the program in English with a group of 15- and 16-year-olds from the school.

In addition to building communication and leadership skills, the program provided the students an opportunity to advance their English speaking skills. Kaska says, “Many of the students were advanced in English but they really needed to work on their word usage.”

To help them, Kaska served as grammarian during each session. She recorded the students’ speeches and replayed the recordings at home, taking careful note of each student’s use of English. At the next session she provided each speaker with detailed feedback on both word choice and sentence structure.

At first, Kaska says, it was difficult to get other teachers at the school to sponsor and help advertise the YLP, but once they participated, they liked it and saw how the students benefited from it. Because the students expressed their desire to continue the sessions, the teachers are exploring a fusion of YLP and a Gavel club. The goal is to provide ongoing opportunities for students to give speeches, and “perhaps do a little debating as well.” It looks hopeful that last year’s YLP will be the first of many at Premontrei Gimnazium, and in Hungary.



*From left, Past International President Ted Corcoran and Toastmaster Bridie Corrigan present a certificate to Darwin Zapata for his participation in the YLP in Dublin, Ireland.*

### South Africa

While YLP is gaining a foothold in Hungary, it is an established tradition in other countries, such as South Africa. Since 1984, District 74 Toastmasters have conducted YLP programs at schools in and around the South African city of Port Elizabeth. Last year alone, students in 14 area schools participated.

According to Colleen Love, CC, CL, grade 11 learners not only learn communication and presentation skills through the YLP, they also learn “how to run a meeting and conduct themselves in the business world.” The most interesting aspect of this application of the YLP is the capstone event, when at the end of each course at the various schools, “a competition is held and the best speaker is entered into an Inter Schools Competition whereby the learners compete against each other,” Love says.

Contestants deliver a three- to five-minute prepared speech on a subject of their choice. Next, the top five speakers face off in an impromptu-speaking contest, in which the overall winner is decided. For more than a decade, the Inter Schools Competition in Port Elizabeth has exemplified the potential for the coordination among YLPs to create an even more robust experience for youth participants, Toastmaster organizers and community members.

## Ireland

As seen in Hungary and South Africa, the YLP benefits youth as either a stand-alone program or as a coordinated effort conducted for students with different needs.

Take, for example, the YLP workshop implemented last year at St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls and St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys in Dublin, Ireland. The program was offered to Transition Year students who had successfully completed the junior cycle of secondary education in Ireland, and who had embarked on an additional one-year education program. Most notably, it was the first time that the YLP had been offered to this group of deaf students.

Toastmaster Maggie Owens, a member of the Athy Toastmasters club in Athy, County Kildare, Ireland, recounts the greatest challenge of working with this youth population. "Some of the students communicate through Irish Sign Language (ISL), others with 'Total Communication' and some by 'Speech' only," she says. "Promoting language acquisition through effective communication epitomizes the teaching styles of both schools. In St. Mary's and in St. Joseph's, we endeavor to provide our students with every opportunity to engage in meaningful conversational exchanges and group discussions to enhance their communication and language skills."

Sometimes logistics are a challenge. For instance, when the group couldn't arrange an interpreter for a particular meeting, a YLP organizer came up with the idea of using voice-recognition software. Although it was a brilliant solution to the problem, the software wasn't very accurate. Owens recalls how the software's mistakes were a source of amusement. Each time, for instance, that the software heard the name of a participant named "Darwin," it showed up on the projected screen as "Darling!"

Despite the logistical hurdles and software glitches, the YLP for deaf students at St. Mary's and St. Joseph's was a smashing success. Throughout the eight-week course that Owens conducted, she noted how participants overcame their shyness and shed bad habits, "such as hands [that were] stuck inside pockets while speaking, and a lack of connection with an audience because of a lack of eye contact."

Owens says, "I felt privileged and proud to see the students enhance their eloquence and their interaction and leadership skills through their preferred mode of communication (ISL, Total Communication, Speech) within the friendly environment of the Youth Leadership Program." For the 10 students who participated, completing the YLP was a powerful means of developing their voices, regardless of their mode of communication.

## United States

Another program focused on a student population in Atlanta, Georgia. Started in November 2014, this YLP included students in the third, fourth and fifth grades—roughly ages 9 to 12—at Dunbar Elementary School.

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## HOW TO START A YLP WORKSHOP

The **Youth Leadership Program**, presented in an eight-session workshop, offers a multitude of benefits to the young people who participate as well as the adults who lead the program. So how do you start one of these workshops? The first rule is that it must be sponsored by a local Toastmasters club. The club supplies the experienced members to present the program. One of the members serves as the coordinator.

The sponsoring club, or a cooperating organization, selects the participants for the workshop. The program must be presented following the guidelines of YLP materials, which can be purchased through the Toastmasters Online Store. These include the coordinator's guide (Item 802) and the participant's workbook (Item 805). A YLP kit (Item 811) includes a coordinator's guide and five participant's workbooks as well as evaluation guides, completion certificates and a coordinator certificate.

### ANOTHER YOUTH PROGRAM

Our members are not the only ones who can share the benefits of Toastmasters with young people. **Interpersonal Communication** is another community-based program offered by Toastmasters, but unlike the Youth Leadership Program, this one doesn't need to be presented by club members.

Interpersonal Communication is aimed at helping teenagers build strong listening and communication skills while understanding their own communication style. It features materials designed to be used by teachers or other adults who mentor teens in their community, such as youth program administrators, guidance counselors, church leaders and others.

Interpersonal Communication includes two manuals, both of which can be purchased through the Toastmasters Online Store. One is for the leader of the program (Item 701A) and the other is for participants (Item 701B). The Interpersonal Communication kit includes a leader manual and 10 copies of the participant's manual.

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*Jaidah Jackson delivers a speech as part of the YLP in Atlanta, Georgia.*

Though some may doubt that elementary-age students are ready for the rigors of the program, Yvonne DeBellotte, ACB, ALB, of the Transit Talkers club in Atlanta, wholeheartedly believes that “it is never too early to learn public speaking and leadership skills.” She shares how participants at the public elementary school were like “sponges that soaked up the energy the core team gave.” She said that the program produced “confident students who embraced the thinking that they too can do what they put their hearts and minds to do.”


DeBellotte hopes other elementary schools will consent to allowing a Toastmaster to conduct a YLP workshop either during regular school days or as an after-school enrichment program.

As evidenced by the snapshots of the English-language focus in Hungary, the Inter Schools Competition in South Africa, the multiple modes of communication used by deaf students in Ireland, and the “tween” participants in the United States, it is clear that the adaptability of the YLP is limited only by the creativity of its organizers. It also is clear that the YLP has the potential to benefit a wide range of people younger than 18.

Many of us will only know the advantages of starting the Toastmasters journey as an adult. But with our leadership and involvement in YLPs, we no longer have to wonder what speakers can accomplish if they start in Toastmasters before adulthood. No doubt, Aimee Ennis McLoughlin and other YLP participants around the globe will one day demonstrate the benefits of their exposure to Toastmasters at a young age. ■

**CHRISTINE CLAPP, DTM**, is the author of *Presenting at Work: A Guide to Public Speaking in Professional Contexts*. Her consultancy, *Spoken with Authority*, trains professionals to surpass their personal best each time they present.

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