

Speaking his Passion



If you would ask Pietro Di Benedetto if six years ago today he would be on his way to the World Championship of Public Speaking, he'd most likely say... never in a million years.

By Laura Casella

"I went to my first Toastmasters meeting on a dare," recalls Di Benedetto, as he sits behind his desk at I.D.I. Displays where the 48-year old works as an account manager. "You should come, a friend told me. I said, are you kidding me? I have a decent job; I've been public speaking for a long time, what more can I possibly learn?"

Di Benedetto would soon bite his tongue over those words. He went to the meeting and realized he had been too quick to judge.

"I said holy smokes! There's a lot more I could learn here."

Toastmasters International is a non-profit organization that helps people become better communicators as well as it helps to build strong leadership skills. From a humble beginning some eighty-five years ago, Toastmasters now has two hundred and fifty thousand members worldwide and about twelve thousand clubs in over one hundred countries.

Di Benedetto has been a member of Toastmasters for six years and currently trains with the St. Lawrence Toastmasters Club, the oldest club in Eastern Canada.

"We're like the New York Yankees of Toastmasters," laughs the Saint-Leonard native. "We have lawyers, chiropractors, business people, engineers, accountants, sales people, teachers, and the list goes on and on," he adds about the type of people who join the club.

Although Di Benedetto was already familiar to performing onstage, as a MC for events on the weekends, he says public speaking is not something that comes entirely naturally to him.

"Public speaking is a skill. You have to work hard at it to become better at it. It's the difference between a professional hockey player and a good player," he explains. "There are a lot of good hockey players out there but in order to make it to the NHL, you really have to hone your skills and look at all the details."

Thus, for the past several years, a determined Di Benedetto has been perfecting his public-speaking abilities, which he says have helped him become much more efficient at his job and a better listener in general. What began as just a friendly dare has turned into a



lifestyle for this man, who, over the last few years has competed and won numerous speech-making contests. One of his most notable triumphs came just recently.

"Each year twenty-five thousand participants from around the world participate in the Toastmasters International Speech Contest," Di Benedetto says. "Back in May in Montebello I participated in the Eastern Canadian (District 61) Championship and I placed first!" he says, enthusiastically.

So what does this mean? It means Di Benedetto will now go on to compete against the 80 best Toastmasters in the world in Palm Springs, California in August for the

title of the 2010 World Champion in Public Speaking. He hopes that his speech, titled, "An Armour of Courage" will bring him closer to that goal.

"I started writing that speech last July," ponders Di Benedetto, whose parents are from the Abruzzo region. "It's a story about how my father taught me about courage. **As I got older in life and was faced with new challenges, I started gaining a lot of respect for my dad. I asked him one day, 'How did you get a job in a country that you hardly knew the language? And he answered, 'ci siamo armati di coraggio.'**

"I have a great respect for my father and that generation of hard working people," he goes on to say. "That was their legacy. Work hard, be honest, and things will come your way. I hope that this is part of my legacy to tell my kids, Angela and Anthony. We're just not people from the east end anymore. We can achieve anything we set our minds to."

It's been an incredible journey for Di Benedetto who owes all his success to his family, close friends, and all the Toastmasters he has met over the years. Winning this championship would mean more than a medal to him; it would be a testament to his hard work, and the hard work of Italians everywhere.

"It would mean that a little boy from a family of immigrants could achieve something so big," says an emotional Di Benedetto. "This would be dedicated to my parents; it would be my thank-you to them."

And as Italians we wish Pietro good luck, but in our eyes, he has already won.

For more information on Toastmasters and to keep up with Di Benedetto's ride to Palm Springs please visit www.sltoastmasters.ca ❖