

# Employee overcomes speech obstacles to speak out in Toastmasters club

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## Special to AEP Now



Mary Gallion, who had a vocal cord disorder from early childhood, now is Lieutenant Governor for Marketing for District 40 Toastmasters.

Photo courtesy of Toastmasters

Public speaking is not a favorite hobby for most people, and at one time that was especially true for AEP employee Mary Gallion. Gallion was diagnosed with aphonia at the age of 5 and completely lost the use of her voice.

"I was known as the quiet one, the little girl who couldn't talk. When I was around 5 years old, I became ill with fever and sore throat. After that, words just didn't come out any more. I could make sounds, but couldn't form words," said Gallion. "I was diagnosed with aphonia, which is a disorder of the vocal organs that results in the loss of voice. As a child I had no idea what was happening."

Despite the obstacle, Gallion attended public school, studied hard and became valedictorian of her class. The most painful part of her life was when she realized that she would not be able to deliver her valedictorian address.

Even though the school provided occasional speech therapies for her, it was not enough to help her regain the use of her voice. It was a depressing time, but through her faith and family support, she made it to college where she also continued her speech therapy, working with the dean of the Speech and Hearing Center. She agreed to attend speech therapy every day without receiving credit, and to help younger children at the Center who had speech problems.

"I worked with my therapist for months on the vowel sounds and then two-syllable words. I was between 19 and 20 when I first began to form longer than three-word sentences," said Gallion.

"Though I began to form words and eventually sentences, I never thought I would be able to do any public speaking, compete in speech contests or be in any leadership roles in the future because of my speech problem."



It was a turning point when she decided to join Toastmasters in 1991. Toastmasters is a non-profit educational organization that helps people around the world develop and hone their communication and leadership skills. Members practice prepared speeches and table topics speeches (impromptu speeches) during the meetings. A timer, grammarian and evaluators are there to help members improve their speaking in a positive learning environment.

"Speaking was hard enough for me, let alone public speaking. So when I was asked to join Toastmasters 18 years ago, I simply refused," said Gallion. "Moreover, I was trying to avoid words that were too difficult to pronounce. I knew if I joined Toastmasters, I would have to face my fears because everyone would know I had speech problems. After much struggle, my speech therapist encouraged me and I gave it a try."

She was glad she decided to face her fears head-on.

"With a safe learning environment and encouragement from club members, I began to compete in speech contests and volunteer in each club officer role. What I thought was impossible became possible with Toastmasters. It was truly amazing," said Gallion.

In April 2009, Gallion was elected Lieutenant Governor of Marketing for District 40 Toastmasters, covering clubs in Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky with over 3,000 members. Her role is to help communities and companies start Toastmaster clubs and to also guide clubs with few members grow stronger.



In June, Gallion received the Distinguished Toastmaster Award, which is the highest award one can achieve in Toastmasters.

Gallion was instrumental in getting three clubs started at AEP; two clubs meet at lunchtime at 1 Riverside Plaza, (one meets Wednesday, the other meets Thursday) and the other club meets in Gahanna.

She is a member of the Pickerington Toastmasters Club and AEP Toastmasters Club, and is a staff accountant for IPP and Investment Accounting at AEP.

There is no cost to visit a Toastmasters club. AEP has three Toastmasters clubs in central Ohio; see the [AEP Toastmasters site](#) on AEP Now for more information. To find a local club in other areas, go to [www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org).