

Through Course, Students Find Voice

Speech Class Boosts Confidence,
Poise



By Lavinia Rachal
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Christopher Jones is standing at a lectern at the Tucker Road Community Center delivering a speech and trying his best to convince his audience that high school prepares students for adulthood.

"You will have the people that are on task," the 14-year-old says, "and the people that will get you off task and/or in trouble."

At first Christopher, sporting zigzag cornrows, is eloquent except for a few "ums." But then while delivering his speech, he loses his place. He tries mightily to locate the spot where he messed up. Finally, he acknowledges, "I lost where I was."

From her seat in front of him, his coach, Scarlet Maith, softly encourages the teenager to stop and gather himself, then continue. Christopher takes a few breaths and returns to his speech.

Recovering from verbal stumbles is the kind of lesson that Maith, 46, likes to give to young people as a public speaking instructor. She teaches an eight-week course at the Fort Washington community center for youngsters ages 12 to 14. The course is offered through the Prince George's County Department of Parks and Recreation.

Why a public speaking course for kids? Because Maith knows what it is like to be shy about speaking. As a teenager growing up in the District, she said, she was so shy she missed opportunities.

"The shyness would prevent me from putting myself out there," said Maith, who works full time in advertising at The Washington Post. "I wanted to be a cheerleader when I was in school, but I was too shy to do it."

Maith has always wanted to help young people. Her youngest son was in a reading program at Tucker Road, and she liked the community center's atmosphere.

"It wasn't very fancy," she said adding that the center is about sharing skills and experiences with others.

Maith approached Vance Johnson, the community center facilities director, about starting a public speaking course using her experience as a charter member and former president of the M Street Verbalizers club, a D.C. chapter of the Toastmasters International public speaking and leadership organization. Johnson liked the idea.

Maith, who has never been a teacher, put together a program aimed at guiding young people through effective speech techniques. Her program requires students to write their speeches and study the way they deliver them. Students are also required to listen to and critique one another.

Amira Hicks, 12, a seventh-grader at Oxon Hill Middle School, was one of Maith's students. She said the class helped her "not to be afraid to express opinion."

Maith's classes have about six students. Dominic Lyon, 14, worked with Maith during the summer in hopes of bettering his chances of becoming an actor, director, entrepreneur and eventually president of the United States.

Dominic, who attends Surrattsville High School, said he was impressed with "the amount of confidence that I got out of the class." His mother, Stephanie Carter, said Maith's class also helped her son develop leadership skills.

Tyler Joyner, 12, a student at St. Ambrose Middle School in Cheverly, was nervous when his mother and grandmother signed him up, but his doubts dissipated after the first few classes.

"I didn't think I could read in front of a crowd," Tyler said. "The only experience I had was playing piano at church. I know I can go out into this world and do what I want. You just have to have that confidence."

Many of Maith's students -- including Brandon Perry, 14 -- come to class anxious about speaking in front of crowds.

"At first I thought I was going to be the only one with the problem," said Brandon, a student at Grace Brethren Christian School in Clinton. "But all of us had the same problem. We could all relate."

Maith works easily with young people. She tells them their voices are their instruments, and she evaluates every speech her students deliver.

When his speech is done, Maith gives Christopher, the student who talked about the importance of school, a few pointers.

She compliments the teenager on his writing but tells him to look at the audience while he's speaking as a way of connecting with his listeners.

"When you establish eye contact with your audience," she says, "you are saying, 'I am confident, I am important, I am your equal.'"

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