



## Leadership, personal growth, and rap: Welcome to MacLaren YCF Toastmasters

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Warith M. went to his first Toastmasters meeting because they served coffee and snacks, and it was a chance to do something outside his living unit. He had no idea what the organization was — he says he “thought it was about toast.”

Four years later, Warith is president of the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility Toastmasters chapter, and he says the experience has been instrumental in helping him interact more positively with others.



*Warith M. shared a freestyle rap during a recent Toastmasters meeting at MacLaren.*

“I’ve never been shy about public speaking, and I always try to put on an air of confidence when I’m talking to people,” he says. “But I’ve learned to be more polished. When I’m talking to people, I’m rough around the edges. I don’t like censoring myself. I need to make it better so I can communicate with everyone, not just people I’m comfortable with.”

Helping youth learn to be more confident communicators — whether they are in front of a



*Brandon D. led the Toastmasters meeting.*

crowd, in a work environment, or simply with each other — has been the goal of MacLaren’s Toastmasters chapter since it formed five years ago.

The group, called Hopemasters partly because it is offered through [Janus Youth Programs’ Hope Partnership](#), is one of 15,900 [Toastmasters International](#) chapters worldwide. The club is open to all youth at MacLaren, as well as staff and the general public; currently, a volunteer participates along with the youth.

Toastmasters’ mission is to empower individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders. The organization does this by providing supportive environments where members can learn together and help each other develop their communication and leadership skills.

If outside Toastmasters were to attend a meeting at MacLaren, they would find many familiar formalities. The members have well-defined roles, including a timer who ensures speakers are following the proper time limits; a grammarian who tracks speakers’ use of unnaturally long pauses and fillers such as “ah” or “um”; and speech evaluators who provide speakers with positive feedback and suggestions for improvement.

What makes the Hopemasters distinctive is the speech topics they choose — topics that reflect their backgrounds and circumstances. At a July meeting, when asked what he would change if he was president, one youth said he would “change the ghettos because nobody needs to live in such crammed up areas.” Another youth, in a speech titled, “Leadership and Change,” urged the audience to consider, “What should our mission be here in this facility? It should be to change our attitudes and behavior through personal growth.”

Warith spoke about his longtime love for freestyle rap. He related how, during his incarceration, he shifted from rapping about “cars, money, clothes, and women” to topics that “could help people know how we feel when we’re locked up here.”

“I learned that you could rap tight and rap about something with conscience at the same time,” he told the group before sharing a freestyle rap about his struggles with anger and distrust of people in power.

Not every youth focused on his current circumstances, however. Gustavo P., the club’s vice president of education, discussed scientific ideas about whether other life exists in the universe. His topic was based on a research question he had explored in one of his college classes.

Gustavo joined Toastmasters two years ago to face his fear of public speaking. “You should have seen my shirt after my first speech,” he says. “It was drenched in sweat. My friend said, ‘You look like you just ran a 5K,’ and I said, ‘I was just up there giving my speech.’”

He hid his anxiety well at the recent meeting, using a PowerPoint presentation to show data while walking confidently around the front of the room as he spoke. He is working toward earning a Competent Communicator award through Toastmasters.

“It looks great on your resume, and you get to improve your skills,” he says. “I want to be a personal trainer, and I’ll have to talk in front of strangers all the time.”

But that’s not the only way he sees the group helping him. “Sometimes we have to go in front of judges and important people,” he says. “Not being scared and having the right skills helps a lot.”



*The timer held up a yellow card to show speaker Gustavo P. that his speech had reached the six-minute mark.*



*Edward Y. delivered a speech entitled “Leadership and Change.” He asked the members to consider, “What should our mission be here in this facility?”*

Several members say that joining Toastmasters — and finding support there from staff and other youth — has helped them discover skills they didn’t know they had.

Brandon D. first found his talent for public speaking several years ago when he was asked to speak at his high school graduation at Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility. When he transferred to MacLaren earlier this year, Toastmasters seemed like a natural fit.

“I really like to reach out to people, put words together, and see what happens,” he says. “Public speaking is something that the majority of people think they can’t do. After you get that confidence, and you get up there and do it, you just don’t want to quit.”