



**For Immediate Release**

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## **Toastmasters Creates Opportunities for Growth at Solano Prison**

**VACAVILLE, CA, April 19, 2015** – Beyond the barbed wire fences and the metal detectors, Delta Breeze Toastmasters club members find a little haven. Twice a month, inmates of California State Prison, Solano, meet to develop their leadership and communication skills - skills that might make the difference between getting into a fist fight after a disagreement or talking through the problem. Members of the Delta Breeze club see these meetings as a valuable means of self-improvement, benefitting them while in prison but also preparing them for life outside of prison.

The club was founded in 2014 with the help of four experienced Toastmasters from outside the prison.

Former police officer and Distinguished Toastmaster Brian Richards is one of the founders of the club. Volunteering with this club has given Richards a new perspective, he said. "It has taught me to be less judgmental. As a beat cop for over six years in the Bay Area, I used to put these guys away...Now I hear their stories and see how much a person can change over time."

Getting the club started took a lot of effort, Richards said. Traveling to Toastmasters meetings at the prison in Vacaville on top of his job in Sacramento requires 16-hour days, but Richards said it is worth it because he can see the positive impact the club has on the inmates.

"It gives them a rare opportunity to speak and have people actually listen to them," he said. Toastmasters gives the Delta Breeze members some freedoms and a sense of agency that they otherwise don't get in the prison environment where everything is strictly controlled and regimented.

The structure of the meetings gives members the opportunity to select topics for their speeches, delegate roles and step up into club leadership positions. Richards said the inmates are proud to be members and reach out to others and encourage them to join. As new people join, it also gives existing members an opportunity to serve as mentors.

One of the club's members is Cotton Jones. He serves as a coordinator for the prison's In-Building Self-Help Program and has been incarcerated for 23 years. Jones said during his time in prison, he has helped create development programs and has seen many fellow inmates struggle with growth.

"Prison provides a textbook example of 'arrested development,'" Jones said. Young men who get sent to prison in their late teens or early 20's don't experience the same mental and emotional growth as those outside of prison, he said. "They have no coping mechanism. Nobody knows how to talk things out."

Jones said there are a variety of programs available to help prisoners mature and develop their skills and Toastmasters complements these other programs. Additionally, the communication and leadership skills honed in Toastmasters can be used to get more out of the other groups.

One of the unique aspects of the Toastmasters program is the evaluation that a member receives immediately after giving a speech, Jones pointed out. "You can't get that anywhere else. That's what keeps me coming back."

Troy Joseph is an inmate and club member who cites the encouraging atmosphere as one of the program's strengths. In closing a club meeting last November, he reminded other members that "the attitude we develop in here, we take out to the yard."

Joseph said that he used to be “a wreck,” and while he still has work to do, he’s a changed man. He said he plans to continue his Toastmasters experience after being released by joining another club outside the prison.

“It’s a great way to improve your speaking skills – not just up on the stage, but in everyday communication.” Joseph said he wants his speaking skills to be at their best so he can give motivational talks at juvenile hall.

“If I can make a difference in just one person’s life, it will be worth it.”

### **About Toastmasters International**

Toastmasters International is a nonprofit educational organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills through a worldwide network of meeting locations. Headquartered in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, the organization’s membership exceeds 292,000 in more than 14,350 clubs in 122 countries. Since 1924, Toastmasters International has helped people of all backgrounds become more confident in front of an audience. For information about local Toastmasters clubs, please visit [www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org).

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