



PEOPLE

Good Deeds

Word Of The Day: Transition

› *By Katie McPherson* › *Photography by Ralph Demilio*

Just like you can't put a good book down, *Healthy Living* can't leave a good story alone. Since we last visited the Dream Chasers and X-Treme Speakers at Marion Correctional Institution in March, they've been busy mentoring new men and spreading their initiative across the state.

Toastmasters International is an organization that seeks to improve members' public speaking skills, honing their communication and leadership abilities in tandem. Gavel Clubs provide the same experience to members who aren't eligible to join Toastmasters clubs, which is why Leonard Rera wrote to Dr. Manal Fakhoury of Toasting Ocala to start one inside Marion Correctional Institution. The rest is well-spoken history.

Following the success of the first two Gavel Clubs at Marion Correctional Institution, five more have spawned this year: Soul Speakers at the main unit of MCI, Freedom Speakers at Re-Entry Center of Ocala, Beautiful Minds at Florida Women's Reception Center, Free to Speak in Polk County and a Gavel Club for Special Olympics athletes. Seven clubs? That's approximately 245 Gaveliers getting a chance at personal and professional development. For Leonard, being the man who wrote the letter to spark it all is humbling.

"I never imagined it doing that. I thought one club, a few guys, maybe one volunteer, but it turned into seven clubs—it's mind-blowing. This shows that even though I'm incarcerated I can still have an impact," he says with a smile. Today he serves as VP of Membership, recruiting new members when others go home.

Dr. Fakhoury is a Distinguished Toastmaster and now Gavel Club Chair for the district. Besides overseeing new club creation, she recently helped submit a successful proposal for Toastmasters International to amend their rules, ensuring inmates in Gavel Clubs retain any awards and progress upon their release when they join Toastmasters clubs.

"We wanted to confirm for anyone who is a Gavelier that their awards are recognized. Once they hit their first award, they earn a credential and we introduce you as a Confident Communicator up to a Distinguished Toastmaster. For example, Andre is at a bronze level, and when he goes out and joins a club, his awards aren't lost. Now we have it in writing that they don't have to start over," Fakhoury explains.

During their October open house, four members gave speeches, the band played and three members performed an original poetic segment titled "Conscious Awakening" about an inmate's struggle with his positive and negative inner voices. Each meeting features a word of the day to enrich Gaveliers' vocabulary, and transition happened to be it. It's the perfect fit for a club aiming to help members become better versions of themselves.

Despite soaring growth and major steps for Gaveliers everywhere, these volunteers and members still have hopes large and small for their clubs.

Dream Chasers President Nathaniel Mandelbaum says one goal will always be consistent: improving their members' confidence and communication.

"We have a lot of talent and experience in the prison system, but inmates are often discounted immediately because of the way they speak. It's part of the culture. This is a small way to combat that. If a guy walks out of here and he can express himself a little better, then we've done something," he explains.

In his speech during open house, Mandelbaum pointed out that communication is at the heart of good relationships. Dream Chasers has helped him solidify his.

"A year into this program, my relationship with my family is better than it has ever been, not because I see them every day but because when I get them on the phone I know how to communicate."

For VP of Public Relations Andre Staton, it's important to express their experiences to the next generation of children without leadership.

"We want to bring kids to the Gavel Clubs we've started so they can see and hear the stories. They think this lifestyle is glamorous. Who are the future men in blue? Our children, if we don't do something about it. I didn't have access to doctors, real estate agents, PR company owners," he says, pointing to volunteers around the room, "who could show me how they got where they are. All they need is someone to show them they are able."

"We have a lot of talent and experience in the prison system, but inmates are often discounted immediately because of the way they speak. It's part of the culture. This is a small way to combat that."

› *Nathaniel Mandelbaum*

One side effect of Gavel Clubs is that they become incubators for more ideas. One upcoming goal is a proposal to create a personal development dorm for inmates who want to surround themselves with others and share that common vision.

While all of the volunteers genuinely enjoy their involvement, the members still feel some pretty immense gratitude.

"Dr. Fakhoury and Toasting Ocala came here not knowing what to expect. They'd never been in a prison before, and it changed their

minds about what the inmates are like," says Mandelbaum. "She's doing amazing work here. We all owe her a huge debt."

"I call her my Gavel mom," Andre adds. "To see seven new clubs is just confirmation you can chase your dreams—even from prison." *HL*



Find out more › If you're interested in learning more about Toastmasters or Gavel Clubs or would like to attend a meeting, email Dr. Manal Fakhoury › manal.llc@gmail.com or info@myfli.com