

The Magic of Paris

I celebrated the City of Light by visiting a Toastmasters club.

BY LINDA COHEN, ACB, ALB

This will be my 10th year as a Toastmaster. I learned about the organization by accident when a stranger overheard me giving a sales presentation at a Starbucks coffee shop and recommended that I check it out. I've stayed all these years because I believe it's one of the best personal-growth organizations in existence.

Last year, while serving as president of my club, I volunteered to be the target speaker for several Speech Evaluation contests at other area clubs. It was valuable for me to receive a variety of speech evaluations from members of different clubs. Visiting multiple clubs was so enlightening that when our family planned a vacation to Paris in the spring of 2016, I decided to visit a club there.

Paris has several English-speaking clubs. I contacted two and realized one was within walking distance of the apartment we had rented near the Pompidou Center. The meeting of the Paris Speech Masters took place at a lovely French restaurant in Le Marais, a historic district in Paris. At the request of the club's vice president education, I served as general evaluator. We met on an upper floor in a cozily lit room, and it was a leisurely meeting, lasting almost 2 1/2 hours with a break in the middle for dinner and wonderful red wine. This was France, after all.

The 15 or so members in attendance, who spoke excellent English and came from a variety of other countries, created a highly interactive and inclusive meeting, punctuated by laughter and camaraderie. When I delivered my general evaluator report, I shared a story. While in Paris, I'd had two experiences related to turning on the sink water in the bathroom. (Many sinks there have foot pedals to do this.) The first time, while I was struggling to figure out how to get the water on, a stranger kindly showed me where to step. The second time, in the bathroom during the break at the Toastmasters meeting, I



The author (shown holding the Toastmaster magazine) visits the Paris Speech Masters club where she met and became inspired by 91-year-old member Peter Kenton (in the red sweater).

was able to help someone else who apparently was as clueless as I'd been. While I playfully demonstrated my story for the group, including hand and foot motions, I shared my own sense of humor.

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I offered my compliments to the club. The members had made me feel so welcome; many had even given me advice about activities our family could enjoy while in Paris. I also offered the group a few suggestions for improvement. All feedback was warmly received.

One of the highlights for me was meeting club member Peter Kenton—a 91-year-old DTM. Peter grew up in New York and joined Toastmasters after a visit to California, where his brother invited him to attend a Toastmasters meeting. The chemical engineering company Peter worked for sent him to Paris in 1959, and he loved the city so much he never left.

Peter eventually joined a Toastmasters club in Paris when he was in his 60s and earned his DTM when he was 73. He belongs to three clubs in the city and has given speeches in English, French, German and Hungarian. Peter is an amazing example of what's possible if we decide that age doesn't determine our opportunities.

No matter where we go in the world, when we are with other Toastmasters we are part of the same family. I encourage you to find a club on your next travel adventure, and if that happens to bring you to the Portland, Oregon, area, we'd be delighted to welcome you to our club, Toastmasters for Speaking Professionals. Don't let the name scare you: All visitors are welcome, speaking professionals or not, and we have as much fun and as many laughs as any club I know! **T**

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