

# Find Your Voice. Serve Your World.

## Meet Dilip Abayasekara, DTM Toastmasters' 2005-2006 International President

**N***ewly elected International President Dilip Abayasekara (pronounced Ab-bay-say-kah-rah) comes to Toastmasters with great enthusiasm for the organization and the power it has to change lives. This is because his own life was changed as a result of joining Toastmasters nearly 20 years ago – in this interview, he'll tell you how.*

Abayasekara – or simply Dilip as he introduces himself – takes office as the organization has reached a new record of 211,000 members in 10,500 clubs in 90 countries. During his term in office, he will travel extensively, meeting Toastmasters from all over the world and promoting the organization to community and corporate leaders. An Accredited Speaker and Distinguished Toastmaster, he lives in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Sharon, and their two children, Allison and Alex.

A native of Colombo, Sri Lanka, Abayasekara

attended college in the United States and eventually earned a Ph.D. in chemistry. After working for 12 years as an industrial chemist – and after joining Toastmasters – he surrendered to his avocation of connecting with others through the spoken word. In 1994, he started his own company, Speaker Services Unlimited, through which he offers professional speaking, coaching and training. Abayasekara is the author of the newly released book, *The Path of the Genie – Your Journey to Your Heart's Desire*, in which he outlines his life's journey and the value of the Toastmasters program for self-discovery.

He says the Toastmasters program helped him discover his unique gifts, which provided the impetus to start a new profession and become a professional speaker, trainer and speech coach. He is not alone. "Toastmasters International is full of people who have achieved results beyond their wildest dreams," President Abayasekara says. "We help people gain the confidence and insights to tap their potential. As a result, they contribute their unique gifts for the benefit of others." Consequently, Abayasekara's motto for his term in office is: "Find Your Voice. Serve Your World."



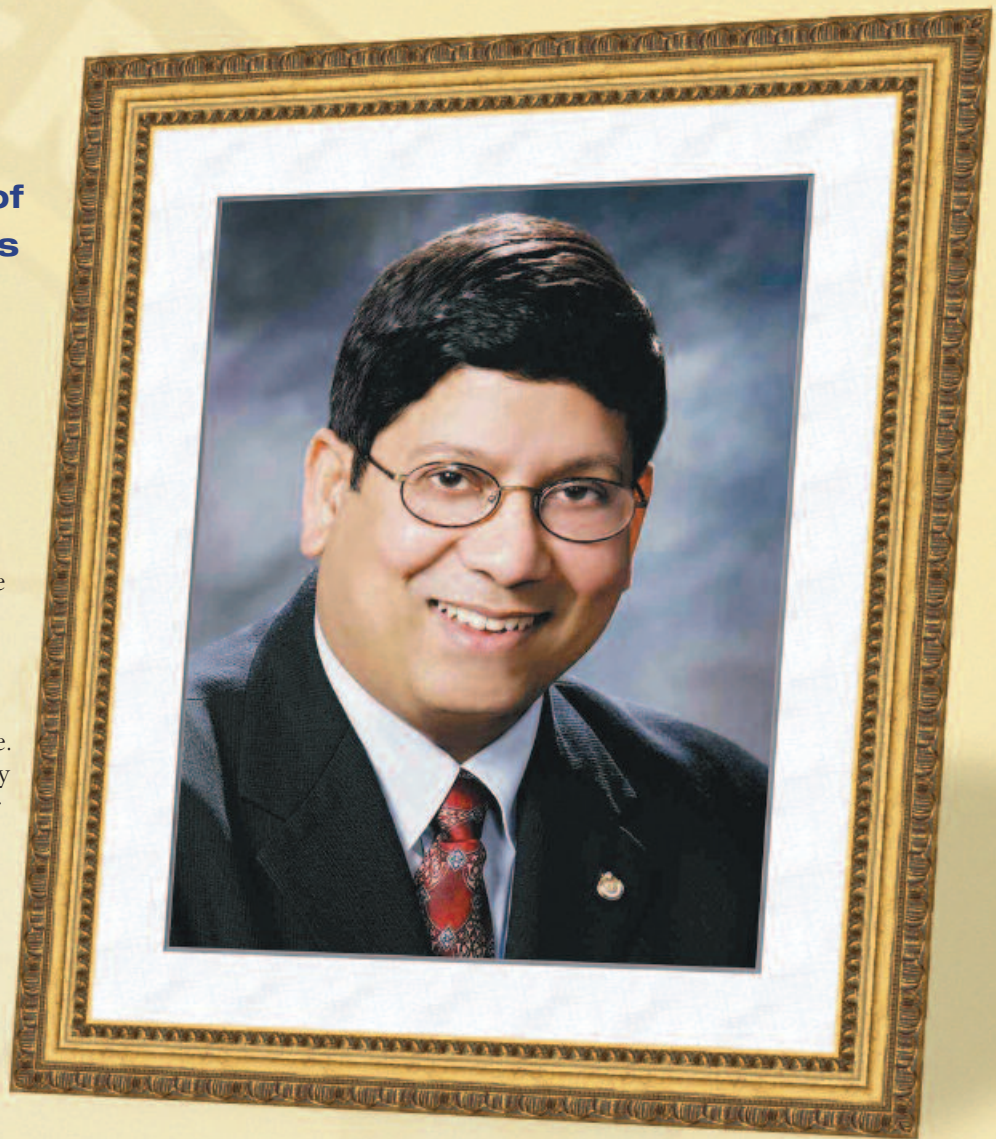
### How has the fact that you grew up in Sri Lanka contributed to your understanding of Toastmasters as an international organization?

I grew up in a multi-ethnic neighborhood and I built friendships with schoolmates of diverse backgrounds – Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers (people of



**“The first result of speech training is self-discovery.”**

— RALPH SMEDLEY



European descent). My parents would often entertain business associates from other countries such as England, America, France and Canada, thus giving my siblings and me an appreciation for people of many different cultures and insights into the interconnectedness of the human race. My mother is a journalist and my father worked in the newspaper business, so I was exposed to the power of language and the importance of communication. Those are central lessons in the Toastmasters journey. Having gained my higher education in the U.S., and knowing both Eastern and Western cultures, make me feel that I am a citizen of the world.

Toastmasters International, in the same spirit, is global in outreach and united in its focus to elevate the lives of all people through communication and leadership development. We are many, yet we are one!

**You have a doctorate in chemistry, but you abandoned a career in that field to do something closer to your heart. Tell us how you turned your love for Toastmasters into a career.**

The Toastmasters program revealed my true passion – to connect, inspire and raise the sights of people to new possibilities. I discovered my true calling through the Toastmasters communication program and experiences in speech contests. This insight came at a time when I was working as a scientist, spending many hours in a laboratory, researching ways to create properties in materials that would lead to new products. Once I decided to live my life according to my gifts and interests, I transitioned to my new career in stages – first, by teaching at several community colleges and then by starting a part-time business providing speech coaching, seminars and keynote speeches. This venture gradually grew until I jettisoned

my scientific career to follow my heart's desire of touching lives through the power of the spoken word. I owe this “awakening” to Toastmasters and the support of my wife and family.

**You also teach at one university and serve as special assistant to the president at another. Do you get to promote Toastmasters in your daily duties?**

I teach a course at Eastern University in “Managerial and Interpersonal Communication.” That’s what we do as Toastmasters leaders, isn’t it? This course obviously gives me an opportunity to give many plugs for the value of Toastmasters. My work as assistant to the president of Central Pennsylvania College is part-time, allowing time for my own business. The job I do for the college president entails doing things I love – writing speeches, coaching, emceeding events, leading and contributing to teams, and coordinating strategic planning. I founded a Toastmasters club on campus and started an annual oratorical contest for the college students. I also started



a “Student Leadership Training Institute” (SLTI) for the purpose of teaching student leaders the fundamentals of effective leadership. The SLTI offers many opportunities to encourage student leaders to visit the campus Toastmasters club – and to join it!

#### **When and why did you join Toastmasters?**

I had heard about Toastmasters while in graduate school and resolved to join a club after I started my first job (in St. Louis, Missouri), but I had forgotten about it until my wife showed me a newspaper announcement about a coming meeting of the South County Toastmasters Club. I visited and loved what I saw. But that club’s meeting time was not convenient for me, so I visited another club, the Webster Groves Club, and happily began my Toastmasters journey. Unlike most beginning Toastmasters, the reason I joined was that I loved (and still love) to give speeches and wanted an audience to listen to me! But I soon found out how much I could learn and grow through the Toastmasters program.

#### **Why have you remained a member of Toastmasters for the past 19 years?**

As I’ve mentioned earlier, my life has been profoundly and positively affected by the Toastmasters experience. Along with that experience has come a deep love for this organi-

zation and a powerful desire to help others gain its life-changing benefits. Other reasons that keep me going are the strong friendships and the continual opportunities to meet and get to know wonderful human beings.

#### **One of the organization’s strategic goals is to make Toastmasters International as well known for leadership development as it is for communication skills development. Why?**

The central reason is that the quality of an organization depends on the quality of its leadership. Consider our challenges: We are a nonprofit organization of 10,500 clubs with 211,000 members in 90 countries. The 70 full-time staff members at Toastmasters World Headquarters do an amazing job, but the day-to-day leadership of the far-flung membership is done by volunteer leaders: 73,500 club officers, 231 top three district officers, and hundreds of area governors, division governors and other volunteer leaders. So having effective leaders is vital and leadership development is a strategic priority.

Previous Boards began to put teeth into leadership development several years ago. We instituted a leadership track with the Competent Leader and Advanced Leader designations, a High Performance Leadership project requirement, and the *Leadership Excellence Series*. We are aware that we need to further strengthen the leadership experience and education that our members receive. A significant step toward that is the new leadership manual,

**“My life has been profoundly and positively affected by the Toastmasters experience.”**

**- DILIP ABAYASEKARA**

#### **What aspect of Toastmasters do you like best?**

That’s easy; I love the club meeting! It provides a fundamental learning experience that is the same whether you belong to a club in Pennsylvania or in Timbuktu. I’m always fascinated by the speeches I hear, the challenge of Table Topics, the art of evaluation and the fine points of meeting management.

#### **Explain why you chose your theme, “Find Your Voice. Serve Your World.”**

To “find your voice” means to discover your worth, potential and unique gifts. To “serve your world” means to help others find their voices. These twin experiences, I believe, are the highpoints of the Toastmasters adventure. My theme challenges us to continually improve, discover what makes us special, and then do something positive with

which will debut in 2006. The manual will help members extract greater leadership learning and insights from their roles and responsibilities in club meetings. Down the road, I see the organization making the leadership track very comparable to the current educational track.

#### **Tell us about some leaders you admire, and why.**

My father and mother – for dedication and commitment to their family as well as being great role models in personal and professional integrity, humility and excellence. Other leaders that inspire me include Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa and Ronald Reagan. Their life stories have much to teach us.

#### **Do you have any role models when it comes to speaking – if so who?**

Yes. For simplicity, elegance and eloquence: Abraham Lincoln. For connecting with an audience, for projecting the greatness of the human spirit and for speaking with



humor, warmth and sincerity: Ronald Reagan. For bringing his message to life with an incredible ability to paint a scene with words and causing his hearers to feel as if they were participants in the unfolding drama of life-changing messages: Rev. Peter Marshall. For tapping into the imagination of people with vivid word pictures and for challenging an audience to rise above soul-sapping obstacles: Martin Luther King Jr.

#### Tell us about your worst speaking experience.

What a memory! As a scientist in a new job, I felt unprepared and unsure of my boss's expectations. For the first time in my life, I experienced stage fright – dry mouth, pounding heartbeat, shaky knees and lack of focus. Thankfully, after the first few minutes, I forgot my nervousness and did OK. But that experience of stage fright surprised me and made me resolve never to go through that again.

#### Is there a speech you've given that stands out in your mind as your favorite?

My favorite is the speech I gave at the 1992 World Championship of Public Speaking, titled, "Love Makes the Connection." I loved the substance of that speech, but the experience of delivering it was magical. I felt moved by a higher power. I knew that I was talking about something that was important for everyone. I felt at one with the audience and everything seemed to move in slow motion. Later I found out that my experience is what researchers of high performance call "being in the zone" or "being in flow."

#### Do you have any hobbies and interests outside of Toastmasters?

I've had voice training and love to sing – I've been active in my church choir for many years. I'm also fascinated

with philosophies and techniques that can improve my ability to coach people and help them reach higher levels in their speaking prowess. So I read books and listen to CDs and tapes that help me continually improve. I also like to read biographies of people I admire. Physically, swimming is the sport I enjoy the most.


#### How do you define success?

The best all-purpose definition of success I've heard is Earle Nightingale's, "Success is the progressive realization of a worthy ideal." I believe success is living up to our commitments, empowering others around us, creating a vision of possibilities, and doing what it takes to achieve our goals while living in harmony with our principles and core values. When we are successful, we will experience the deep satisfaction of meaningful achievement and the knowledge that we have blessed others.

#### What are your dreams and goals for your term in office?

Qualitatively, my dream is to see our organization grow and prosper in its spirit of empowerment and realization of human potential in every club, and that all our members become ambassadors for Toastmasters. Quantitatively, my dream is to see every club and district become Distinguished, and my goals are a membership increase to 220,000 and the number of clubs to increase to 11,000. I would also like to see further global growth – provisional districts in the Caribbean and in South Asia and a Territorial Council in China. If we achieve these goals, we would have taken giant steps forward in making effective oral communication, as well as leadership development, a worldwide reality.

#### If you had a message for every Toastmaster, what would that be?

Find your voice. Serve your world! 

## Are You Good Enough to be a Pro?

  
**Toastmasters' Accredited Speaker Program is now accepting applications for 2006.**

**T**he Accredited Speaker Program is designed to recognize those Toastmasters who have attained a professional level of excellence in public speaking.

To qualify, you must be an Able Toastmaster or Advanced Toastmaster Bronze and a member in good standing of a Toastmasters club. You must have completed a minimum of 25 speaking engagements outside the Toastmasters club environment within the past three years. Then, you must pass a rigorous two-stage judging process.

Those Toastmasters who earn the prestigious title of Accredited Speaker will receive widespread recognition both inside and outside Toastmasters International. They will have taken the steps that can launch them on exciting careers as professional speakers.

Only a handful of Toastmasters have what it takes to become Accredited Speakers. If you think you're one of them, write to World Headquarters for details on how to apply.

The deadline for the 2006 Accredited Speaker Program is November 1, 2005.