

Toastmasters set speakathon record

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THEY came. They spoke. They conquered.

Over 30 members of the Kuching Toastmasters Club (KTC) stepped up to the podium at the Kuching Waterfront Godown Amphitheatre recently in a bid to break the current record — 24 hours and eight minutes — for longest speakathon in the Malaysia Book of Records (MBR).

They comfortably smashed their initial target of 30 hours by an hour, with a final tally of 31 hours and five minutes.

The speakathon started at 7.15pm on March 14 and ended around 2.20am the following Sunday.

About 180 speeches, between five and seven minutes each, were delivered, encompassing a wide range of subject matters from soil organisms and ghostly encounters to touching personal accounts of life-changing events.

The event drew curious stares and friendly enquiries from many people walking along the Waterfront over the weekend — with more than a few stopping for a while to sit on the benches to listen and cheer the speakers on.

The results and video, documenting the speakathon will still need to be verified by MBR before it can be officially listed as the longest speakathon, but for now, organising chairman Sahli Singh Dev is relieved months of meetings, planning, preparation and late nights have paid off.

There were some last-minute changes but nothing that couldn't be handled.

"I'm actually feeling much more relaxed today than yesterday (Friday evening) as we are sure at this stage we can meet and surpass the 30-hour target," he told the *Sunday Post* just before midnight Saturday on the sidelines of the speakathon.

One of the keys to the success of the whole event was a meticulous master schedule, Sahli revealed.

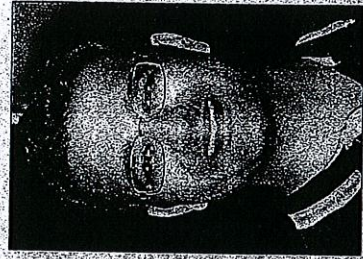
Speaking slots were arranged to suit each member's availability on the day, with adequate time to get to the waterfront and back.

Members took turns to speak, evaluate, keep time and manage speeches on the floor.

"The other key was teamwork. If you could have asked for a perfect team and committee, I would have said the MBR. Everyone on the team has been given permission to take responsibility and be proactive, so things which could have turned into issues were promptly dealt with as they cropped up without having to refer to the committee. Everyone stepped up to the plate to help ensure the event's success. We definitely couldn't have done this without such great teamwork," he acknowledged.

Endurance race

Sahli shared the most difficult part was the planning, and once done, the speakathon pretty much



SAHLI SINGH DEV

went the way it was mastered to. Aside from the master schedule, KTC members spared no expense to ensure the long haul ahead, especially during the quiet wee hours of the morning, would be as comfortable as possible.

As Napoleon Bonaparte once said, an army marches on its stomach, so the refreshment team made sure the refreshment station was always well stocked with water, drinks, sweets, snacks and fingerfood.

This included a toaster and four loaves of bread, as well as an assortment of continuous operating beverage machines with one solely dedicated to supplying copious amounts of that life-sustaining elixir critical for the success of any late night endeavour — coffee.

A few members brought foldable lounge chairs and cushions to sit on while someone even brought an inflatable mattress along.

Surprisingly, despite being held next to the Sarawak River, mosquitoes were not a lingering problem during the event. However, that's not to say everything went smoothly according to plan.

Among a few of the unexpected incidences — a projector which refused to cooperate right before it was due to be used, a member who was broken into and the only public toilet without walking distance closing at 10pm, leaving members to queue for a toilet break for the next 45 minutes.

The committee also had to switch some speakers' slots around as some individuals couldn't fulfil their allocated time at the last minute.

The arrangements set by MBR provided additional challenges for the committee to consider. Initially, KTC had set a target of 28 hours, eight minutes as per the old record of 24 hours, eight minutes set in 2006, also by members from the same club.

However, just a few days before the event, KTC had back from MBR which said the record-breaking attempt needed to be 30 hours, leaving the club scrambling to rearrange and fill the slots.

KTC also needed to provide sufficient documentation and proof of their record-breaking attempt. So the club set up a laptop with a large external hard drive to record a continuous video of the whole speakathon — plus dedicated timekeepers to painstakingly document the duration of each speech and evaluation. The evidence will be

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— Sahli Singh Dev, organising chairman

sent to MBR for verification.

Great teammates

For freelance editor Evelyn Gan, participating in the speakathon has definitely added to her confidence to speak in public. The 25-year-old joined KTC at end of December last year. While far from being a wall flower, she wanted to improve her public speaking skills and overcome her fear of speaking before a group of people. She saw the club's mission and activities as an opportunity to learn leadership skills and as a way for self-development.

"It really is an art to master to speak effectively to a group of people. Once you take the stage, and everyone's focus is on you — that's why the nervousness comes in. It's different from just talking to a friend. I believe the ultimate goal to master in public speaking is to be able to speak to the audience like friends. That's the goal I'm working towards now — to speak with the audience as my friend," she said.

Evelyn presented seven speeches in total — the first time she had to prepare and deliver for someone who has only been in Toastmasters for just a few months.

One of her biggest challenges took place on Saturday morning when she had to present five speeches back to back. This was a drastic change from normal Toastmasters meetings where each person only has to deliver one speech — with the benefit of a few weeks to prepare.

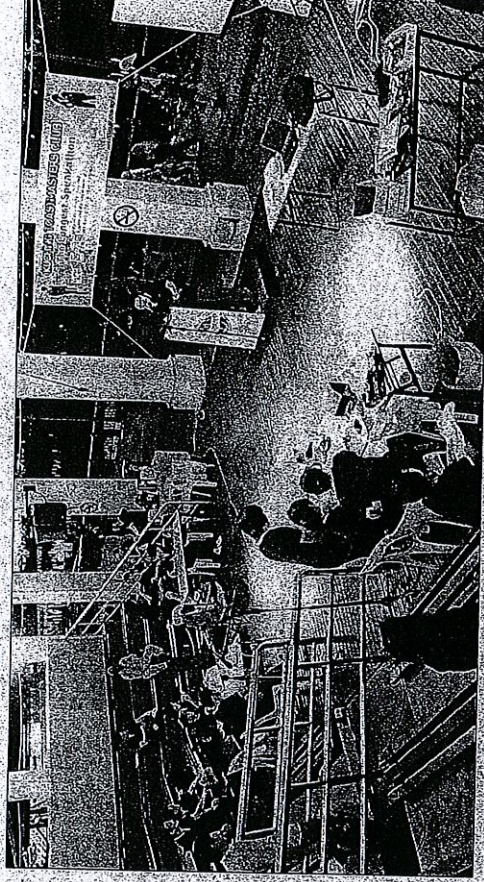
However, far from being thrown into the deep end and left to swim with the sharks, Evelyn received much encouragement from fellow Toastmasters to prepare for the speakathon, including a mentor in the form of KTC vice president for education Shirleen Yeo who provided moral support as well as practical advice and feedback.

To top Evelyn about one week before the event, she had to identify her speech topics and two more weeks to research the subjects, draft and refine content and practice the delivery. Evelyn rehearsed my speeches in my head while I was at work," she recalled.

She expressed her gratitude to her fellow club members for their positive support as teammates, and audience members as she felt it helped her stay relaxed.

"This experience has really trained me to do impromptu speaking, unlike in the past where I memorised the speech word for word — which I did not have the opportunity to do during the speakathon."

"This has actually taken me one level higher to take on



The well-organised speaking area just a few hours into the event.



On the opening day, KTC patron Datu Dr Haji Yusoff Hanifah (centre) turned up to give a speech and also to show his support for the club. By his side during the formalities were (from left) KTC president Vera Tan and speakathon organising chairman Sahli Singh Dev.

impromptu speaking and overcome my fear. Now, I will not feel so afraid to speak on the spot, and it has helped me to overcome my nervousness," she shared.

Evelyn added that she was grateful for the objective evaluations by her peers which followed her speeches as it really helped her see what she could improve on and it has been very useful in helping her to improve her public speaking skills.

Strength to strength

The idea to organise the recent record-breaking attempt was first mooted by organising committee member and speakathon chief floor manager Michael Lam who was also instrumental in getting the 2006 speakathon off the ground.

He pointed out that the value of joining a Toastmaster's club comes from how good the peer evaluation is as it is this feedback that will enable an individual to improve his or her public speaking skills.

By learning how to give specific, constructive evaluation,

Toastmasters are also more self-aware of how they can improve their own speeches.

Evaluators not only ensure the speech topic meets certain criteria as set out in the Toastmasters manuals but also give feedback on other factors such as diction, body language, flow, logic, use of visual aids, and so on.

"I'm a very accomplished public speaker and debater, was also quick to dispel what he says are often unrealistic expectations and perceptions about the Toastmasters as a whole."

"Different people go into Toastmasters for various reasons. Some want to get the awards as quickly as they can while others take years. It doesn't mean the faster you get the awards, the better speaker you are."

"Neither does it mean those with higher awards are better speakers than less-awarded members. With due respect, not every Toastmaster is necessarily a good speaker, and not necessarily every non-Toastmaster is weak in public speaking."

"But if nothing else, this (Toastmasters) opens an avenue for people

to become better speakers, and if we achieve that, it's good enough for me. I'm so happy to know our club provides a place where people can learn and practise at their own pace. In many ways, make you the best speaker but better speaker than you were before," said Michael, who joined KTC 26 years ago.

He added that if people wanted to become better public speakers, they needed to practise as much as possible — and not just practise but make sure they are practising the right thing.

"It is unrealistic to expect one will be able to speak like Martin Luther King after just joining Toastmasters for a month. You only get out as much as you invest in yourself. That means learning from good people, mentors, reading books and all that. But above all, one must practise," he shared.

Kuching Toastmasters meets on the first and third Sundays of the month at Harbour View Hotel at 7.15 pm. To find out more, email the club kuchingtoastmasters@gmail.com or visit their website at <http://kuching.toastmastersclub.org>.



The speakathon reached the 30-hour target at 1.15am on Sunday (March 16) with more than a handful of speeches to go. In this group photo call members of the organising committee and a few KTC members pose with the time board to commemorate the achievement.