

**At 85, this Toastmaster has spent two decades teaching the Youth Leadership Program to students.**

# Molding Future Leaders

Eleven-year-old Tyler Jones plans to run for a U.S. Senate seat when he's 30 and eventually make his way to Washington, D.C. The Arizona youngster discovered his desire for a life in politics when he took the Toastmasters Youth Leadership course from instructor Michael Di Cerbo.

"Toastmaster Mike changed my life," says Tyler, who attended the class at Kiva Elementary School in Paradise Valley, Arizona. "He made me realize that one of my talents is public speaking, and that I'm very interested in politics and leadership."

The sixth-grader, whose presentation skills surpass those of many adults, is one of thousands of children who have been fortunate enough to take the leadership class from Di Cerbo in Arizona schools over the last 20 years.

Because the veteran Toastmaster has positively affected so many young lives, he received the 2008 Hon Kachina Award for Volunteerism, which has been awarded in Arizona since 1977 to recognize the achievement of outstanding volunteers.

Di Cerbo joined Toastmasters in 1980 and quickly rose through the ranks, serving as a club officer and then a district officer. At one point, he was preparing to become a district governor and also

get his DTM; while working toward his DTM, he chose to conduct a Youth Leadership Program as a way to meet one of the requirements.

"Initially, I didn't want to hold the youth [program]," admits Di Cerbo, who chuckles about his reluctance now. "Eventually, I gave in and decided to teach one course so that I could fulfill the requirements, and I found it wasn't so bad." The results were actually so good that they prompted a call from a teacher who asked him to teach the course to her class. Today, at age 85, he is still teaching the Toastmasters Youth Leadership course, spending as much as 20 hours a week in the classroom, and often working a full day.

Di Cerbo follows Toastmasters' Youth Leadership Program manual,

holding nine-week classes that cover the basics of speaking, including the various types of speeches and their functions, the organization of a presentation and leadership training. Each class meeting features five speakers as well as evaluations from peers and a coordinator. Speech topics vary according to participants' age. Di Cerbo teaches leadership by giving students various roles each meeting, such as Topicsmaster, Meeting Leader and Ah-Counter. "These positions make the students realize that they are in command, and with those positions come responsibilities," he says.

During each meeting, Di Cerbo scores the students' speeches and then names a Speaker of the Day, who is then eligible for the Speak-Off. That event is held during the

last week of classes. Parents and grandparents are invited to attend the program. Tyler, the budding politician, has won first place for the last two years.

## Big Benefits

Di Cerbo started teaching leadership classes after he retired from a career working with semi-conductors. He says the Youth Leadership Program is valuable to today's youngsters. "One of



◀ Michael Di Cerbo (left) with YLP participant Tyler Jones and sixth-grade teacher Carla Schneider.

the major benefits of the program is that the positive and constructive criticism leads to an increase in self-confidence. Parents often tell me that their child was shy and then blossomed. Children also find that the program organizes their thoughts and makes them better writers.”

Teachers who have worked with Di Cerbo over the years are amazed at the progress the kids make in his course. “There is no time in life when the fear of ‘standing out’ is greater, yet Mike helps students overcome this fear and move on to a higher level of self-confidence,” says Holly DiTallo, a teacher at Cheyenne Traditional School in Scottsdale, Arizona. “Not many people have the gift of teaching to this age group, yet Mike comes in, offers valuable life tools, demands their respect, and leaves them better students at the end of the program. He’s good at what he does because he cares for the students, and they can sense it.

“Who else at the age of 85 can walk into a room of middle-schoolers and have them say in unison, ‘Good morning, Toastmaster Mike!’ He’s a beautiful anomaly!”

Carla Schneider is a teacher at Kiva Elementary School where Tyler Jones attends. She has seen Di Cerbo work his magic for the last eight years.

“I think the most important message that Michael gives the students is to have a positive attitude and confidence in their abilities,” she says. “He also reminds students that the key to success is to practice, practice, practice. I have seen kids thrive under his direction, and I think the most important thing the kids get from the program is the lasting benefits they gain. Our elementary students who take his course go on to

become student leaders in middle school.”

Kiva’s principal, Michael Helminski, often hears stories of how the early training has helped older students. “Many seventh- and eighth-graders come back and tell me how the Toastmasters training

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has helped them with confidence when they were required to do classroom presentations in middle school,” he says. “We can’t take it for granted that leadership is naturally developed. Many children need role models and strategies for developing leadership skills, and that’s exactly what the Youth Leadership course provides.”

Educators who have watched Di Cerbo work over the years feel that his infinite patience and good humor are the secrets to his success. “I have seen Michael model how to deliver a line and patiently work one-on-one with the student until he gets the desired effect,” says Schneider. “Never have I seen him get exasperated or frustrated with a student. He always manages to find something positive to say to each child.”

Tyler’s mother, Laura, agrees that Di Cerbo has the right approach with kids. “He’s really good at motivating elementary and middle schoolers and relating to them,” she says. “While he doesn’t hold back on the negative, I’ve seen him critique the kids without criticizing in a very constructive way that they understand. Since taking the classes, Tyler’s organization of his message and ability to really get that message across has improved considerably, and his confidence has soared.”

According to Tyler, the confidence and organizational skills he gained in Di Cerbo’s class helped

him improve in many areas of his life. “Throughout life you have to make a lot of tough decisions and Toastmasters training gives you the confidence to make those decisions,” he says. “If you think of Toastmasters as the training wheels for life, then eventually you’re able

to ride with no hands. The most important thing that Toastmaster Mike taught us was that our speech has to be from the heart, not just from the brain. I learned that if you are confident with your speech and really know it, the rest will follow.”

Wise comments from youngsters like Tyler drive Di Cerbo and make teaching the class gratifying. “It is so uplifting and satisfying when students say that they’ve been helped by the program,” he says. “I feel that in some small way I am contributing to helping the next generation become leaders. The things they learn stay with them. About three years ago I got a call from a young teacher who wanted me to teach the leadership classes in her school. When I asked her how she knew about the program, she said that she had been one of my students and she wanted her students to benefit from the class like she did. Calls like that show me that I’m doing something valuable.” **T**

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**Editor’s Note:** To conduct a Youth Leadership program, order the Youth Leadership Educational Packet (Item 811; \$17 for material for five students).