

Newark orator plans to tell 'em in Las Vegas

By EDWARD L. KENNEY
Staff reporter

NEWARK — Come Saturday, Dilip Abayasekara could give the speech of his life at the World Championship of Public Speaking in Las Vegas. Don't bet against him. The 40-year-old scientist has been fine-tuning his vocal chords since his earliest school days in Sri Lanka. *Elementary-school age:* "We had a little servant boy in our household and we used to write speeches and give them to each other," says Abayasekara, of Frenchtown Woods. *Middle school:* "I memorized Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, John F. Kennedy's inaugural Address, I memorized parts of Winston Churchill's speeches. No one ever told me to do it, I just got a thrill out of it. It was as red-blooded to me as an American kid picking up a ball and a bat."

High school: "I remember the title of the first speech I used to compete. The title was 'Communism is the Answer to Sri Lanka's Problems.' We had to take a pro or con position and I took a con. From among the speeches I had memorized, I pulled out Patrick Henry's 'Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death,' and toward the end of that speech you could hear a pin drop. There was just this dead silence. . . . It was the first time I realized I could hold an audience."

Abayasekara, who immigrated to the United States 20 years ago and went to college here, will compete at Toastmasters International's 61st annual convention. He is one of only nine regional finalists to advance through the ranks of the 160,000-member organization and qualify for the competition.



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Dilip Abayasekara is ready to compete in the world championship of public speaking in Las Vegas.

"I joined Toastmasters because I love to speak, and I found out I was an oddity," says Abayasekara, a new-product researcher at W.L. Gore & Associates in Elkton, Md. "Most people join Toastmasters because they want to get more confidence in public speaking. I already had the confidence. I joined because I wanted a captive audience."

On Saturday, he'll have an audience of about 2,500 fellow Toastmasters when he represents Region Seven, which runs anywhere from Nova Scotia in Canada down to the northern parts of Virginia. The nine regional finalists who will face off in the neon city represent 7,500 clubs in 62 countries.

Abayasekara is president of the Greater Newark Area Toastmasters.

Growing up in the former British colony . . . it received its own Toastmasters club about 10 years ago . . . never presented a language barrier. "In Sri Lanka we learn English as a compulsory subject."

Abayasekara says a Toastmaster needs "three first-class speeches to go all the way" to the finals.

He'll deliver a new speech in Las Vegas and has come up with a universal theme: "Love Makes the Connection" will be about human relationships.

He uses every opportunity to practice . . . including while driving alone in his

TOASTMASTERS

The Greater Newark Area Toastmasters meets every first and third Wednesday of the month from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Du Pont Co.'s Loviana Building on Paper Mill Road in Newark. Call 834-2385 for information. "It's open to the public and you don't have to be from the Newark area to come," says club president Dilip Abayasekara. The Newark club is one of 17 Toastmasters International clubs in Delaware. For information about other clubs, call the division director at 834-0539.

ent and believes he will have rehearsed his "Love Makes the Connection" speech about 300 times before he delivers it in Nevada.

"An audience wants to be entertained and receive something of significance from the speaker. The worst sin a speaker can commit is to bore an audience. The other great sin that a speaker can do is to finish a speech and have someone in the audience say, 'So what was the point?'"

Abayasekara says his style has changed over the years from oratorical to conversational.

"When I first started speaking in Toastmasters, I used to give a speech to a body of people. Now when I speak I try to connect with each and every person. The feeling I like to create is that I'm speaking to you in the comfort of your own living room, and each person should get the feeling that I'm talking directly to him or her."