

IN MEMORIAM: Fran Okeson, DTM (20), PDG(46) – Leader, Mentor, Innovator  
(Supplement to *The Voice*, December 2019)

## *In Memoriam*



**Frances Okeson, DTM20, PDG46**

**Where a beautiful soul has been,  
there is a trail of beautiful memories.**

**- Ronald W. Reagan  
40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States**

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Toastmasters of District 83 and District 46 mourn the loss of Distinguished Toastmaster (20) Fran Okeson, who passed away on Wednesday evening, September 11, 2019. Fran had two children, Nancy and Peter; and three grandchildren, Mary, Laura, and Charles.

Fran was a cornerstone for Districts 46 and 83 and will be missed by all who knew her.

But Toastmasters was not the only group in which she volunteered. She cared for 31 foster children and was an adult family care provider for 31 years, caring for over fifty residents. She was a Girl Scout leader for 13 years; Founding President of the Women's Club of Tottenville (1985-2019); and: "Queen Mother" of the Women's Club of Tottenville Red Hat Society formed in 2004. She received proclamations from three Staten Island Borough Presidents for her volunteer efforts in the community.

Fran originally joined Corner House Toastmasters on Staten Island in October 1988 but, when she found out the club didn't meet during the summer, she and her friend joined Richmond County Toastmasters Club the day they visited the club. As a new member, Fran was immensely curious about "all things Toastmasters" and tackled the educational program and leadership track with energy and zeal.

She received several awards during her years as a Toastmaster in District 46; the Area Governor of the Year and District Toastmaster of the Year awards from District 46 in the 1990s; and received a Presidential Citation from Toastmasters International in 1999 for her work in chartering a club for people who were physically unable to come to a Toastmasters meeting; instead, she brought the meetings to them.

Fran served as District 46 Governor from 2001 to 2002 and had as her personal theme "Toastmasters: Share the Light." She led the District through the dark days after 9/11. Following her term as District Governor, Fran was the founder, host and executive producer of the public access cable TV program in Staten Island, "Toastmasters in the Community." The No Limits Toastmasters Club has played a major role in this program since 2005.

When District 46 split, the Staten Island clubs moved into District 83 where she later earned D83 Toastmaster of the Year award in 2012-2013. The Staten Island cable TV show was the winner of the 2013 CTV NOVA Award in the category of Education. She served as the HPL Advisor (2008-2019) and shared her "Power Pocket" concept where everyone carries a speech in their pocket unknowingly. To prove this point, she would ask someone to reach into their pocket and pull out their keys and ask them to tell a story about them. In 2014, she published her list of speech topics in the District 83 newsletter, *The Voice*, which is shared with many new members by those members who were fortunate to have worked closely with Fran. She was a staff writer for the District 83 Newsletter for many years.

Over the years, Fran had held every officer role in each of her seven Staten Island clubs, has taken the role of Area Director several times, showing she was the epitome of leadership within the District and in the world of Toastmasters. Not only did she charter clubs on Staten Island, she was instrumental in chartering clubs in foreign countries. She had sponsored and mentored several clubs during her lifetime as a Toastmaster, as well as over 500 new members. She conducted more than 40 Youth Leadership Programs on Staten Island which included one for the Staten Island Chapter of the New York Urban League. To her credit, over 35 Speechcraft sessions were held. During her time as a Toastmaster, Fran earned 100 CCs and 20 DTMs, which is an incredible accomplishment.

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Another of her legacies is whenever or wherever a group of Toastmasters gathered, a speak-out was planned and successfully executed! Over the years, she planned outings to the local farm club baseball games, Staten Island Yankees. Toastmasters from across the District were invited to attend a "Speak-out and Baseball". Upon arrival at the stadium, the group would begin with a speak-out, where as many as 10 members gave a speech, followed by food, friendship, and baseball--all in an air-conditioned suite!

Fran is and will continue to be greatly missed by all Toastmasters who knew her. A memorial service was held in late October where many of her fellow Toastmasters gathered in remembrance.

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**"Memories of Fran:**

If a person came to a meeting with an interest in joining Toastmasters, Fran didn't care a less if the person was gay or straight. If they were black or white. If they were 95 years old with a fading memory or 18 years old with a chip on their shoulder. If the person wanted to join and learn how to become a better speaker, Fran would do everything in her power to assist that person and make it happen. She will be greatly missed, but we will all fondly remember her."

Ken Raftery, DTM

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"Fellow Toastmasters,

It is with a grieving heart that I need to inform you our beloved Fran Okeson has left this world on Tuesday, 11 September 2019. She has answered her first Table Topic question in front of her Lord and Maker. There was one long deep breath and pause as she was able to take that breath without the weight of this world upon her chest. There was at least one "Oh" as she saw clearly for the first time in many years. There was an "Ah" as she realized the pain in her back and legs had disappeared. And am "Um" as the reality of where she was now standing came into full view. There were toastmasters from District 46 Twin Towers club surrounding her along with her Toastmaster friends from District 83. There was a joyous round of applause as she completed that table topics speech. The Toastmaster of the meeting thanked her for her participation and looked forward to hearing her speak again as she would attend future meetings and she has just begun her new Pathways Education Program. Her Toastmaster membership has been transferred to the "Heavenly Gates Toastmasters Club, Club Number 00". Fran was my Mentor in District Leadership, and she was my Mentee in Pathways. She is already being missed."

Rachel Ann Weiss, DTM

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"Fran was our 'lighthouse.' You couldn't help but be drawn to her energy and wisdom. Always a beacon of hope, she guided everyone in her path to strive for more; to do more; to be better. My first phone call with Fran was to inquire about club logistics, as I just moved to Staten Island and was investigating joining TM. Our call lasted well over an hour. She was incredibly engaging and informative. Before the end, she asked if I would be on her cable show, Toastmasters in the Community. From there she asked if I would take on a club role and speak at other clubs. Somehow, when Fran asked for something, you never felt pressured or obligated, just inspired to deliver. And boy, did she deliver for you. When I asked Fran how does one get to the international contest, she shared all her knowledge, introduced me to winning speakers, sent me CDs of past contests, and led me every step of the way. When I walked on stage for the 2010 finals, I breathed deep to take in the crowd and channeled Fran's energy. I

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felt her presence right there with me. I wanted to perform well for Fran and show how she profoundly affected my world and helped me impact others. That was the win for me.

“Since I married and moved to NJ, I haven't had the capacity to attend club meetings. However, I still pay my dues to help keep that club thriving and represent Fran's message whenever I'm on stage. I'm truly amazed by what she has accomplished for the Toastmasters community, for Staten Island and for folks abroad. I am incredibly blessed to have known Fran, to have learned from her, and to be embraced by her smile and everlasting guidance.”

Lisa Panarello

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“Working with Fran on a project was always fun, grinding out the details at her home. Her pride in her son Peter was always part of it...she said she couldn't handle the computer work without him. Her persistence in getting participation for her Speak-outs was phenomenal. Amazing also were the creativity in her CTV productions, her loyalty and care for her fellow Toastmasters, her diligence in details, and her reach into the total Toastmasters community. We are richer for having had the model of Fran's effectiveness in Toastmasters.”

Margaret Flory, DTM, PDG (46), PID (7)

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“The first time I met Fran, she said, ‘Shorts are not really proper.’ Things went uphill from there as Fran became my mentor. Ultimately when District 46 split and we became District 83 under Fran's guidance, I became the first District Governor for District 83. From that point on, most of my success in District 83 was achieved with the assistance of Fran. She will surely be missed by me.”

Paul Scharf, DTM, PDG (83)

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**“My Friend Fran**

Friends come in and out of our lives and at different times in our lives. Some friends you have from childhood; others you may meet from groups you are involved in. Fran Okeson came into my life one Wednesday evening in April of 2018, when I walked into a Toastmasters meeting. There she was, sitting at the head of the table, larger than life. I understood immediately that she was in control. After only one meeting I decided to join, Richmond County Toastmasters, and she was extremely happy about that, encouraging to me. I had no idea what to do and how to do it. She explained to me that I should not worry and guided, supported and advised me on what and how to make my speeches, encouraging me to speak about things I was interested in.

“Fran had quite a good sense of humor. Before I knew it I was appearing on this show as a guest and then became a member of the No Limits Toastmasters club. She asked me to be the floor manager and then Sergeant at Arms. There came a time she couldn't attend a few tapings and asked Rachel and I to host the show. We knew this was a great honor and a vote of confidence from Fran.

“As our friendship grew, my father became ill and the prognosis was poor. Her kind words and quotes she would send me were of great comfort. As her health became a problem, she spoke to me and asked for my help. Though she always wanted to be in control, she started to realize she couldn't do the things she had in the past. She began to allow me to help her and I was honored. Our phone conversations continued and were becoming more frequent as she was giving me advice needed to continue her work in the Toastmaster clubs. Our friendship, though only over a year, felt like it was a lifetime. She told me so many stories that I felt like I was at the

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events. She continued to encourage me to participate in contests and take on more responsibility in each of the clubs I participate in.

“Fran Okeson is a Toastmaster legend and everyone, from club members to Toastmasters International staff, knew her. She helped them learn more about Toastmasters from the questions she would call and ask them. My life is better and I have been blessed because Fran Okeson was my friend, and I will always treasure our time together and conversations we had. I miss them and know she is guiding me from the Toastmaster Club in Heaven, that she is probably president of by now.”

Jane Costagliola, IP1

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“I have known Fran ever since I joined Toastmasters close to 20 years ago. I am where I am today in my Toastmasters journey because of Fran. She was an amazing woman and a role model to all of us. She lived and breathed Toastmasters. She has helped, guided, and mentored countless Toastmasters, including me. I very clearly remember when I first joined Toastmasters in June of 2000, I attended club officer training at her house in Staten Island, and she had set up her whole house for the occasion with breakout rooms, food, snacks and drinks, I was very impressed.

“She opened her heart and her home to Toastmasters! We die-hard Toastmasters consider each other as family, and Fran was instrumental in growing our Toastmasters family not just here in NY and NJ, but also around the world. She helped charter clubs in foreign countries and she helped people right here in Staten Island by starting so many clubs including one for folks who could not travel and had health issues, called the “No Limits” Toastmasters Club; and Toastmasters International recognized her for her work by giving her a Presidential Citation.

“She practiced what she preached and gave at least a speech a day, told us all not to give speeches for “free.” Always get an evaluation. Fran was never afraid to speak up and I saw her tell so many Toastmasters to dress better, so I learned quickly. PDG Paul Scharf always carried a tie with him as Fran would give him grief if he wasn’t wearing one. She wanted us Toastmasters to look professional and be professional. She really cared!

“She always said she was not tech savvy and needed her son to help her. She adored her son Peter and clearly he was a wonderful son to her. She would say I am not good with computers but always managed to mail out DVDs of her TV show to the participants, send emails and was so organized. It was just amazing; her shows ran like clockwork and people came from far and wide to be on her show. She showed us in spirit and in practice how to be an effective Toastmaster. She always had forms ready as she persuaded anyone who came into her orbit to join Toastmasters. She had past IP [International President] Dilip Abayasekara join one of her clubs, and he lives in Pennsylvania. He would drive all the way to Staten Island to speak on her TV show.

“When you spoke to Fran, she would start telling you a story, then half way through the story she would think of another point and diverge into another story and in that story she might remember something else, but what was amazing was she always finished the story, got back to her previous point, finished that story and so on back to her original story and finish it. That always impressed me!

“She has encouraged so many of the district leaders in Districts 46 and 83 to pursue the leadership track, including me. When I told her that I would run for LGM, she was very amused and said you don’t have to tell me. Many years later she was very happy for me that I was

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running for International Director and had me come and speak on her show. After I was elected International Director, she asked me to come speak on her show to encourage even more people to be aware of all the benefits that Toastmasters has to offer.

“Her theme when she was District Governor was “Share the Light.” She truly ‘Shared the Light’ with countless Toastmasters and friends, and we are forever grateful for all that she has done for us! She will be missed!”

Radhi Spear, DTM, PDG (46), IPD (9)

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“Fran Okeson, Distinguished Toastmaster, Past District 46 Governor, was a blazing presence in the Toastmasters firmament. I came to know her around 1990 when she was a rising star in District 46. To me, the most distinctive characteristic about Fran was her passion for all things Toastmasters. Among Fran’s unique contributions to Toastmasters were the founding of the No Limits Toastmasters Club which brought the Toastmasters experience to people who otherwise would not have the mobility to attend club meetings; and the “Toastmasters in the Community” cable TV show, which she created to introduce the public to the learning and run that happens in a Toastmasters club program. Her persuasive power was unrivaled. She convinced me to join the Smedley’s Speakers Advanced Club in Staten Island while I was living in Camp Hill, PA and to make the long trip to Staten Island a couple times to speak on her cable TV show.

“Fran hated to fly, but she could tolerate train travel. One of my vivid memories of Fran is when she took the long train trip from NY to Toronto, Canada in 2005 to receive a presidential club banner from me when I was inaugurated as International President. Her proud smile and radiant presence in that gathering of more than a thousand Toastmasters reminded me how much she loved our organization and what a loyal friend she was. Hospitality and humor were two of Fran’s assets. She hosted in her home overnight when she invited me to speak at a TLI and later laughingly told me that now she could say that three International Presidents had slept on her bed (as she had hosted two other IPs, also).



“Fran achieved great things in her life, but I think what she enjoyed most was helping others discover the joy of self-development that she so brilliantly demonstrated in her own Toastmasters journey that resulted in more than 30 CTMs and 20 DTMs among the other milestones. I’m grateful to Fran and her son Peter for their many kindnesses and acts of hospitality to me. As we say goodbye to a dear friend and great Toastmaster, for me and hundreds of other Toastmasters, memories of Fran will live on. As an old saying goes, “Some people come into our lives and leave footprints on our hearts and we are never, ever the same.” Thank you, Fran. Your legacy on earth are the many lives you touched and lifted up. A toast to the incomparable Fran Okeson!”

Dilip Abayasekara, DTM, PIP (2005-2006)

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“The passing of Past District 46 Governor Fran Okeson is a major loss to Toastmasters. She was very active in District 46 for many years – and later District 83 (after District 46 split into two districts). Like me, she joined Toastmasters in 1988. And also like me, she had served as District 46 Governor.

**Compiled by: Janice L. Buffalow, DTM, PDD and Su Brooks, DTM**

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“Fran was known for many things in Toastmasters. First of all, she served as District 46 Governor in 2001-2002, the district year that 9/11 happened. Despite not going out of her house for several days after 9/11, and becoming afraid to fly in an airplane, she was a uniting presence in District 46 and got us through that.

“She is also remembered for her cable TV show “Toastmasters in the Community” on Staten Island. Around 2008, when District 46 split into present-day Districts 46 and 83, she invited all the Past District Governors to appear on that program, and give a five-minute speech about their year as District Governor. The PDGs went in chronological order of when they served. That was an enjoyable experience and she organized that well.

“Another thing that she organized was the Rolling Speak-out, which was a combination Speak-out and bus tour of various Staten Island landmarks. We visited about seven of those landmarks that day. But in between each landmark, one or more Toastmasters on that bus would come up to the front of the bus and deliver a speech (hence the name “rolling speak-out”). My speech that day was about a fictitious baseball team from Staten Island called “The Staten Island Ferries”. I had fun with that speech.

“She also cared about those she came in contact with. This was most evident in her chartering the ‘No Limits’ Toastmasters Club, which was a club for individuals with developmental disabilities. Shortly after that club was chartered, she received a presidential citation from Toastmasters International – an honor only given to about 20 Toastmasters members per year worldwide.

“It is ironic that she passed away on September 11 of this year, and at the age of 83. She was one of the individuals who encouraged me to be a District Governor, something I’m grateful for. She was legendary in Toastmasters and will be dearly missed.”

Brad Shilling, DTM, PDG (46)

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“Before I really knew Fran, she seemed intimidating. I was a nervous Area Governor at the time, trying to make sure I always did things right. My Toastmaster rock star was Paul Scharf, and I tried to impress him with my knowledge and adherence to policy. When he told me, HE was mentored by Fran and that he was once a “newbie” as I was, I was awed. Fran’s star seemed so unattainable. She was (at the time) a DTM 13 times over! She ran a Toastmasters television show! She was the driving force of Staten Island! And when she called Toastmasters World Headquarters, they knew her!!

“Fran’s intimidating presence was only in my head. She seemed that way because of her detailed dedication to Toastmasters. Peter and Toastmasters were her life, and once you knew her, you knew she had a heart as warm as the sun. I looked to her for cues during my TV appearance; I sought her advice for speeches; I eagerly joined her speak-outs at every District conference. We always waited for her arrival at every International Convention, where she gladly gave us all rides on her handicap scooter. The evening at conference when she danced away in her wheelchair is solidly etched in my mind. She was as fun and wickedly humorous as she was dedicated.

“Being a relative newcomer to Toastmasters, I didn’t experience Fran’s leadership as District Governor of District 46 during September 11th, but she confessed to me her guilt and trauma as she felt inadequate in leading the District during this dark period. What she was not aware of

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was that her thoughts of personal paralysis were viewed as courage by her District's membership. She was the pillar of strength. She opened her home and just listened to visiting Toastmasters as they poured out their grief and horror of the tragedy. She counseled each one to write a speech. She knew beyond doubt that each story, each speech, each experience was cathartic when shared. And she knew that Toastmasters was the perfect vehicle for healing.

"I will miss Fran forever! She was truly one of a kind, forever irreplaceable."

Pamela Winter, DTM, PDG (83)

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"I first met Fran in 2009 and was a member of her Smedley's Speakers Advanced club for a few years. Fran was one of a kind. I learned so much from working with her. Some of the lessons I learned were:

- NEVER speak 'for free,' always be sure you can be evaluated by someone.
- Staten Island is full of hidden gems. Fran would always remind us that there were historical sites, museums, parks, and other wonderful places to visit right there on her island.
- Allow as many opportunities for members to speak as you can. If you walked into her meeting, you were going to give a speech, whether you wanted to or not - so you had better be prepared. I first met Fran at a "speak-out" she hosted during the 2009 International Convention. I was not planning to give a speech that night. I ended up giving a speech that night.
- Volunteer for causes you believe in. Fran was a powerhouse in Toastmasters, but she participated in other volunteer activities all over Staten Island for many years as well.
- Add creative and fun things to your meetings. She would tell me stories of fashion show meetings, Toastmasters outings which concluded with a 'speak-out' about the members' activities for that day, and other theme meetings she hosted on Staten Island over the years.
- Dress appropriately, especially when you are in leadership. In her opinion, lady leaders should always wear a blazer. (She once offered to lend me one of hers.)
- Why stop at one DTM? Fran always encouraged people to keep going in the educational program and earn multiple DTMs. She 'walked the walk' by earning 20 of them herself.
- Most important: never, ever, EVER call her while the Yankees were playing!

"I will miss her very much."

Anne Gilson, DTM, PDG (83), RA (9)

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"I met Fran at the first spring conference that I ever attended at the Woodbridge Hilton. She was 'holding conference' with a number of Toastmasters and someone said to me, 'That's Fran Okeson. If she likes you, you're okay. If she doesn't, you're screwed and you'll never be a district officer.' She was a serious, no-nonsense person, but, under it all, she was a sweet wonderful person who loved to tell stories. We became fast friends and she was one of my mentors. Her sage advice was right on point and I loved working with her (as long as you did what she said since she was usually right!). She continued to advise me as I rose to District Governor and I loved her dearly.



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“Fran, I miss your smile, your jokes and your advice. Rest well, my friend, rest well.”

Cyndi D. Wilson, DTM, PDG (83), RA (5)

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“I first met Fran when I was running for District office. She was the litmus test to see if I had what it took to lead the district. There were a few rules or ‘guidelines’ that were not in the Toastmasters manuals that I picked up quickly. (1) Don’t forget Staten Island is part of the district. Tolls and distance are not obstacles for visits from the leadership. As a district leader, you will come over to help with training and contests. You will come over to appear on cable TV. You will come over to celebrate baseball with a box office suite & participate in the speak-out. (2) Getting your first DTM is just the beginning. Always get credit for speaking and always speak. Join multiple clubs. **Dual is cool!** Each club is unique and offers different opportunities for growth. Toastmasters is great. The real power of this awesome education system is when you take it beyond your club out into the world, workplace at large and your local community.

(3) Have fun on your journey. There are going to be some difficult people & situations at times. Embrace them and learn. At times, Fran was...difficult...but I always grew from the experience. It was her way of sharpening my edge. Learning to have fun while under the grindstone is a skill, I’m still working on it but Fran started it. I think the origins of this thought started when I was sitting in the Staten Island Cable TV waiting room and I had a few precious moments alone with Fran.

“I’m very thankful to have been a district leader while Fran was present to enrich my life--in Toastmasters and beyond.”

Bill Hood, DTM, PDD (D83)

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“Fran was an awesome woman who spoke softly with experience and great knowledge backing every word. I was a bit intimidated by her presence but that grew into respect over the years. Dave and I were invited to come to her cable TV show a few times and I was invited back as part of the District Trio for three years. Each visit was a wonderful experience as it was well-run and on-time. The strangest feeling was not moving around much and to focus on the cameras; it gave a different twist on maintaining eye-contact. Each TV show was an experience I cherished and I learned something new at each meeting.



“My most memorable Fran moment was presenting her with the District 83 Toastmaster of the Year award and being able to hand it to her personally on behalf of the District; what an honor for me! She will be missed by all who knew her.”

Janice L. Buffalow, DTM, PDD (D83)

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“One hot and humid summer day when we were preparing for the No Limits Toastmasters Club show, Toastmasters in the Community, I was running around getting everyone set up with their microphones and doing the sound checks.

“Fran looked at me when I arranged her mic and said, ‘I hope you are going to run a comb through that hair before we go on the air!’ Fran always looked out for us to make sure we presented ourselves professionally. She often had to remind Paul Scharf and Isaak Gelbinovich to put on their jackets before they went on the air as well.

“She also made sure everyone knew to dress appropriately in the TV studio, stating, ‘Sometimes it can be chilly inside, so please wear a jacket or sweater.’ She told me sometimes people would dress in attire more suitable for the beach than a professional Toastmasters TV show, so if she said it could be cold, they would get the hint and cover up.

“Fran also emphasized that you should always be prepared to give a speech in case someone dropped out. You also better remember to bring a pen to sign forms and provide feedback. Remember to bring your manuals or Pathways resources too, even to our baseball games and speak-outs”!

Su Brooks, DTM

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“Fran Okeson was a dedicated Toastmaster and mentor to anyone who looked to her. She was always there to share her love of Toastmasters with others. Although I did not know her well, I had the pleasure of being on Toastmasters in the Community and watching her shine. Whenever we spoke on the phone, her enthusiasm flowed through the phone line. District 83 will miss Fran.”

Lynda B. Starr, DTM, District 83 Director

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“I first met Fran when she walked into our newly chartered club with Julie Porowski. They introduced themselves as our club mentors. We had just chartered Jersey Toastmasters on our own in July 1996 and did not know there was such a thing as a Toastmasters District. We had such a great time with our mentors and they with us that Fran and Julie extended their stay with our club for three months more than the required period for new club mentors.

“Since then Fran had been my constant source of guidance on things Toastmasters--and even personal things, like when she helped choose and buy the right walker for my mother.

“In Toastmasters, Fran was not only one of my mentors. She was also constantly pushing me to take on additional leadership roles in the District with ever-increasing responsibilities. When I had some doubts, Fran was there to explain the role to me, always explaining it in such terms that would convince me that the role was easy. Of course, oftentimes they were not as easy as she explained them.

“Fran’s [death] is a great loss to the Toastmasters organization, to the many Toastmasters that she had mentored. It is a great personal loss to me. I will miss her advice and counsel. I will also miss greatly the jokes we used to share. But mostly, I will miss her unique way of pushing people to take on leadership roles that eventually benefit the person who takes them.

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“I must say that whatever I am now in Toastmasters, as a Toastmaster and as a person, I owe so much to Fran. May she rest in eternal peace.”

Tony Figueroa, DTM, PDG (46), PRA (9)

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