



A Tribute to Robert "Bob" W. Blakeley, DTM, PIP

By Bonnie L. Maidak, DTM

"Bob" Blakeley is someone who I wanted to live forever and who helped to make me the Toastmaster that I am today.

I knew his name long before I met him. From years of putting together the District 36 directories, I knew the names of all of the past District 36 Governors, and those few individuals who went on to serve on the Board of Directors, and even in our organization's highest office, International President. Bob served as District 36 Governor in 1965-66, as International Director four years later, and in 1976-77 as International President. (The 'PIP' after his name stands for 'Past International President' and Bob included 'PIP' in his personalized license plates for many years.) [Photo from District 36 History, 1965-1966 year recap]

Yet it was in May 2004 when I first interacted with Bob and to this day I am still surprised at my brashness (and naiveté?) in approaching him. I saw Bob sitting alone at the memorial service for Past International Director Dick Fath (also from D36 & D27). I offered to sit with him so Bob wouldn't be alone, and this began our friendship. If I had waited, I'm sure that others would have filled in the pew next to him.

In those early days of my D36 activities, I struggled with finding my place in district service and leadership. I had already served as Bookstore Coordinator and the afore-mentioned Directory Coordinator. One of the district leaders who was active at the time was a true Jekyll and Hyde personality and tried to prevent me from attending an area contest. The district leader didn't like something that I had previously done, and a temper tantrum occurred at the contest venue's entrance. Through many conversations with Bob, I gradually came to understand the point he was trying to teach me: "Keep your emotions out of your actions". To this day, when I find myself reacting emotionally, I think of Bob's advice.

Bob and I met many times over the years, either at the Panera Bread near his condo in Lansdowne VA or in Jacksonville FL, in the house his wife owned before they married in 2003. Their residence in Florida became permanent 2-3 years ago. I was very thankful that I visited with Bob and his wife in February 2017 at their "new" residential care facility. In each of these visits, Bob answered my questions or shared historical perspectives. I officially asked Bob to be my mentor during the 2005 International Convention when we were both serving in the Credentials Room. Bob had already had one bout with esophageal cancer and I feared that he might not be around for very long. Thankfully I had at least 10 additional years to absorb his wisdom. [Bob is pictured from 2007; photo obtained from NY Times obituary.]



Bob was already out of D36 activities when I met him (because he was living in northern Virginia) yet he kept his interest in Toastmasters alive by advising many candidates for International Director and Internal Officer campaigns. I remember facilitating an appointment with Annelie Weber (ID from Region 7, 2008-2010) and Bob. Whether a candidate won or lost, Bob was willing to provide feedback about

their campaign. Bob and I often met after a convention and discussed the election results – he was always interested in knowing the vote counts and how many proxies were turned in per district. If I am ever fortunate to run for these offices in future, I hope that I remember all that Bob shared and advised.

In his later years, Bob participated in an advanced club in Jacksonville, and most recently in the Firebirds Collective online club. Samir Malak, president of the [Firebirds Collective club](#) shared in his message announcing Bob's passing, that Bob was "delighted ... he was once again able to connect with Toastmasters actively." The Firebirds Collective online club is releasing six videos of Bob's speeches and I recommend you listen to these if you want to get to know him.

Bob was instrumental in the battle to get women admitted to full Toastmasters membership. He shared with me how the Executive Director of the U.S. Civil Service Commission summoned Bob to answer a complaint of discrimination against women by Toastmasters. Bob's letter to the then President of Toastmasters International mentioned that if the federal government withdrew their support, approximately one third of our clubs could disappear. Among other related activities, Bob chaired the committee to look into the question, and the first vote (at the 1971 Annual Convention in Calgary, Alberta) failed by a 5:1 ratio (834 ayes to 4,379 nays). Bob advocated a change in the proposal to let **clubs** decide whether to admit women, and at the 1973 Annual Convention in Houston, Texas, the proposal passed by an 8:1 ratio (4,264 ayes and 527 nays). My source for these data is the [District 36 History, volume 1](#) (look at the Part VI Toastmasters Tidbits, Open Membership – Women in Toastmasters section) and an article that Bob prepared and shared with me. Bob also discussed this historical moment in time in a video of PIP recollections that is available on the TI website. This is one of Bob's most important legacies for the organization.

A second legacy of Bob's is the [Member Service Chart](#). Prior to Bob's revision, the International President was listed at the top of the chart and the club at the bottom. Bob felt that this wasn't right, and he flipped the order to put the Club at the top and the International President at the bottom in a supportive role. When I teach at core officer training, I usually include the Service Chart, and provide the historical perspective of Bob's role in creating it.

The Washington Post and NY Times obituaries led with Bob's achievement in his civilian job at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers of creating the nuclear fallout shelter sign. The black and yellow signs with three triangles represented a fearful time in the 1960's when nuclear war seemed imminent. This is one of the stories Bob told me during our visits.

I honored Bob (and Jim Whitney, another special D36 Toastmaster who passed in July 2007) by including them in a day sponsorship message that ran three times on the local public radio station in Washington DC. I was quite upset when the station changed its policy a few years ago and took away day sponsorships. I happily shared with Bob one year's message, for which he humbly thanked me.

I know that my life was enriched by my friendship and mentorship with Bob. I wish he could have been immortal, so others may have experienced his wisdom and caring attitude. Alas, this wasn't to be, yet in our modern day of YouTube videos, Bob can remain in our hearts. I am so thankful that I took that journey across the church and sat with him in May 2004.