

# JCI's gaveliers aim to transition and transcend



ECB Publishing, Inc. Photo by Laura Young, October 10, 2023

**Robert Burkes, president of Out of the Blue Gavel Club, brings the Oct. 10 meeting to order.**

Laura Young  
ECB Publishing, Inc.

You may have heard of Toastmasters International, the worldwide network of public speaking clubs for building confidence and teaching communication skills. But have you heard of its affiliate, the Gavel Club?

Gavel clubs are certified by Toastmasters and follow Toastmasters protocols, but they are for groups not eligible for regular Toastmasters membership, due to age (below 18) or other circumstances. For instance, you can find Gavel clubs for youth in many schools. Other circumstances may include incarceration, and right here at Jefferson Correctional Institution (JCI) a Gavel Club has been making a difference for inmates for at least 10 years.

This local chapter is called Out of the Blue. The name is a reference to the blue color of prison garb, but it also reflects how the opportunity to develop public speaking skills can help inmates transition “out of the blue” and back into society. Currently 28 of the inmates at JCI are “gaveliers,” as Gavel Club members are sometimes called.

Earlier this year, Tan Nguyen, a member of Out of the Blue Gavel Club for about two years, wrote a letter to the *Monticello News* as the day of his release neared after five years in. In the letter he extended an invitation for a reporter to attend one of their club meetings, which take place every Tuesday morning in the JCI Chapel under the supervision of Senior Chaplain Andy Messer and with the voluntary guidance of Toastmaster Sponsor Andrew Miller.

“Our meetings,” Nguyen wrote, “involve an educational platform where inmates learn, develop and hone in on their communication, leadership and people skills, to assist in better problem solving skills for a more complete successful integration back into society or problem-free interaction in their current or future communities either within the confines of prison or in the free world.”

Nguyen had served as the vice-president of membership for this club, and through Gavel Club activities he worked on earning points toward achieving the Toastmasters awards of “Competent Communicator” and “Competent Leadership.” For him, the awards not only give a confidence boost but are tangible proof of his positive efforts toward rehabilitation.

“Not only I, but we collectively, would be greatly honored with the opportunity to share our stories on how we are bettering our lives and mindsets while incarcerated,” he wrote, “transcending from blue uniforms to leaders of tomorrow.”

The *News* responded to Nguyen's invitation, and approval from the Department of Corrections was granted for a media representative to attend the Gavel



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**Andrew Miller is a Toastmaster and volunteers to guide the Out of the Blue Gavel Club at JCI.**

**For a break during the Gavel Club's Table Topics competition, club members gather in the library adjacent to the chapel at JCI.**

Club meeting on Oct. 10. When the day came, Out of the Blue was holding a “Table Topics” competition among its members to develop impromptu speaking skills.

The meeting, conducted entirely by the inmate members of the club, began with President Robert Burkes leading the Pledge of Allegiance and providing a short history of Toastmasters. Jartavis Peacock served as host and moderator for the competition. Miller along with Burkes and two other inmates, Rico Jones and Brian Norman, formed the judging panel for the contest's rounds. Eric Joyner ushered contestants in and out of the chapel during rounds to keep

opponents from prematurely hearing the topic. Johnathan Bryan took command of the bracket board and topic selection, while also providing humorous commentary between rounds. The eight contestants who stepped in turn to the lectern were Carl Fry, Derrick Middleton, Chad Halsted, Steve Kunkemoeller, Brandon Chisolm, Stanley Lopes, Christopher Campbell and Gary Roche.

These speakers had to rely on their skills and creativity, because the challenge of impromptu speaking lies in not getting the topic until seconds before it's time to speak. Contestants were judged on content, development of ideas, effectiveness, delivery, vocal quality, language and adherence to the time range of 1-2.5 minutes.

In Round One, Fry competed against Middleton with the topic of “Hot and Messy on the Serengeti” – a scenario involving giraffe poop and a confrontation with a customs official; and Halsted competed against Kunkemoeller on the topic of “Outspoke or Outspoken,” which required the contestants to defend (now former) U.S. House Speaker McCarthy.

Round Two pitted Middleton against Kunkemoeller on the topic of “Smoked Out,” requiring speakers to convince chainsmokers to accept a complete phase-out of cigarette smoking; and Chisolm and Roche took turns speaking on the topic of “On the Hotline,” for which they took the perspective of the Apple CEO issuing a statement on uncomfortably hot cell phones.

Middleton and Chisolm advanced to Round Three to compete against each other for Third Place with the topic of “Shark Tank,” for which they made a pitch for an imaginary invention represented by a large roll of tape.

Roche and Kunkemoeller vied during Round Three for First and Second Place with the topic of “Gavel Club Skills,” which gave them a chance to articulate the club's value in their lives.

Club members and guests in the audience could not help but be impressed at every stage of the competition, as the speakers showed quick thinking, the ability to apply life experience to any topic and their undeniable skill with language.

As for the Table Topics winners, Kunkemoeller took First Place, Roche came in Second Place and Chisolm held Third Place.

Miller, in delivering the closing comments, emphasized how members of the Out of the Blue Gavel Club are part of an international organization of more than 16,000 clubs across 143 countries in the world.



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**Contestants in a recent Table Topics competition at a meeting of JCI's Out of the Blue Gavel Club were, left to right: (front) Stanley Lopes and Second Place Winner Gary Roche; (middle row) First Place Winner Steve Kunkemoeller, Carl Fry, Third Place Winner Brandon Chisolm and Christopher Campbell; (back row) Chad Halsted and Derrick Middleton.**



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**Jartavis Peacock moderated the The Table Topics competition for JCI's Gavel Club on Oct. 10.**

“Keep that in mind,” he said, before wrapping things up by reading a poem penned by an inmate.

In a separate interview that day, Stacie Ponder, JCI's assistant warden for programs, commented that Gavel Club ties in very well with the goals that the staff at this incentivized prison have for helping inmates with rehabilitation.

“Building confidence in public speaking assists them in job interviews,” said Ponder, adding that the club also gives these inmates “good social interaction skills and a friend base.”

So, in a sense, all of these Out of the Blue members – whether or not they placed in the recent Table Topics competition – have learned some winning ways that they carry within themselves, inside now and eventually outside.

For Nguyen, the day of the Table Topics was his last day in.

“I'm being released tomorrow,” he said in an interview at the Oct. 10 club meeting.

He'd had five years to think about what landed him at JCI. During that time, he also had two years of Out of the Blue Gavel Club to focus his efforts toward preparing for a better life ahead.

“I'm ready to get out,” he stated simply.

Today, the vision of the club's name is for him a reality. He is out of the blue.

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