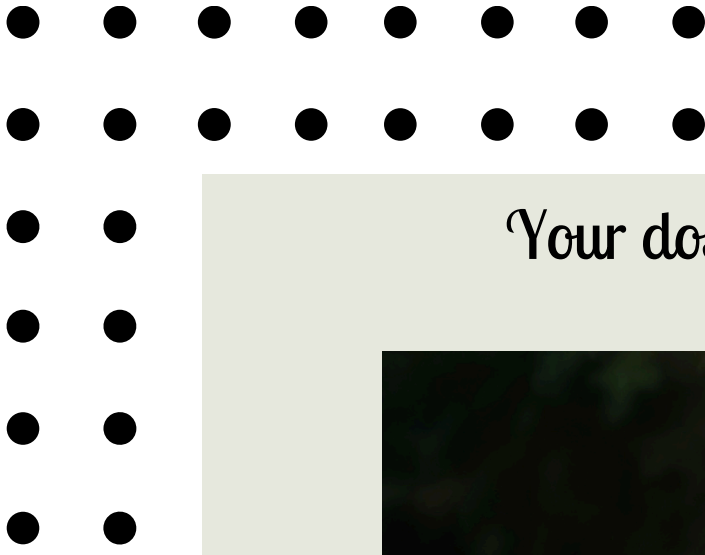


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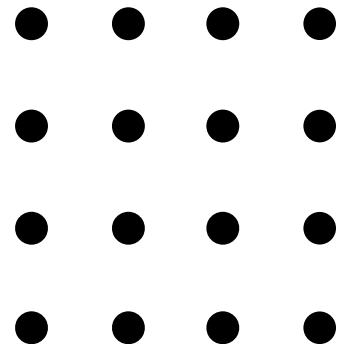


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***InFlow*** MAGAZINE

INSPIRE INFORM EMPOWER





# Call Chuck Rabaut

By: Andrew Miller

We were having dinner with friends when I asked about volunteering opportunities in Tallahassee, Florida. I wanted something more challenging than helping at the Senior Center or delivering Meals on Wheels. The woman across the table said, "Call Chuck Rabaut—he does something in prisons."

The next morning, I called Chuck and learned that he had started Gavel (Toastmasters) Clubs at nearly 30 prisons in North-Central Florida. He was looking for volunteers to attend their meetings.

I told Chuck I didn't know anything about prisons or Toastmasters.

"Relax," he said. "They run the meetings, you just attend, provide support, and answer questions." He added, "Spend the day with me, and you'll learn everything you need to know."

After completing a short course on prison volunteering and having my background checked, I arrived at Chuck's house early one January morning. We climbed in his car and drove 100 miles to Holmes Correctional Institution in Bonifay, Florida. At the front gate, a correctional officer passed each of us a Personal Body Alarm, a cigarette-sized black box with a white button on the side.

"Clip it to your belt," Chuck said, "and don't accidentally press the button. Otherwise, Correctional Officers will be all over the place."

Trying to look calm, I followed Chuck through several locked doors, the frisk room, a chain-link fence topped with razor wire, and down a short walkway that led to the Chapel. Once inside, we entered a meeting room with chairs and tables that faced a lectern. About 30 men, all wearing blue jumpsuits, were clustered around a sign-in sheet. Several approached us, shook hands, and thanked us for coming. Chuck called many by name. I began to feel at ease.

A Toastmasters meeting, in prison or out, consists of a series of prepared and impromptu speeches. Each is evaluated by another member, so speakers get instant feedback on their presentations. Toward the end of the meeting, an "Ah-Counter" tallies inappropriate words, and a Grammarian highlights colorful language, unique expressions, and poor word usage. I was impressed. Many of the men were excellent speakers: articulate, witty, and never at a loss for words.

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Chuck Rabaut at the Gadsden  
Correctional Facility, Quincy, Florida

After the two-hour meeting, we drove 60 miles to a second prison, then 30 more miles to a private women's prison. At each stop, we were greeted enthusiastically, and then we listened to speeches and critiques. While on the road between prisons, Chuck answered my questions. He also took care of my meals: lunch was a sandwich at a fast-food restaurant, and dinner was beef stew at the women's prison.

Chuck often drove more than 1,000 miles a week to visit these clubs. He brought in educational materials, hustled funds, and recruited volunteers. Our day began at 5:00 o'clock that morning and wouldn't end until 10:00 that night. I asked Chuck how he had the energy to do this.

"It has to be done," he said, "when these people get out of prison, they must stay out." We rode for a few minutes, then he added, "Some of them have never heard a kind word or worked cooperatively with others."

When we met in 2019, Chuck was 86.

During the next few months, I attended meetings with Chuck. He also introduced me to Bobby Blackmon, who lost sight at age five. Bobby is a distinguished toastmaster who trains Gavel Club officers and gives motivational speeches.

In 2022, when prison clubs began reopening after COVID-19, I became a full-time volunteer at Out of the Blue Gavel Club in Monticello, Florida. I answered procedural questions, checked the status of awards, and helped judge speech contests.

Mainly, I just listened.

When people are asked why they want to join the Gavel Club, most will say, "I want to be a better speaker. If I had been better able to express myself in front of a judge, I might not be here—or serving such a long sentence."

Their first speech is the icebreaker, an opportunity to talk about themselves. They usually describe where they were born and grew up, about their jobs, education, or military experience, their parents, friends, wives, and children. Many tell of being sexually or physically abused as children, or growing up surrounded by violence, drug and alcohol abuse.



**Bobby Blackmon at Jefferson Correctional Institution, Monticello, Florida**

The Toastmasters curriculum was designed to strengthen communication and leadership skills. Speeches can cover almost any topic but must align with a specific pathway, such as innovative planning, motivational strategies, team collaboration, or effective coaching. I have heard talks on beekeeping, crane operation, the value of owning rental property, and the difference between listening and hearing. After the prepared speeches, a Topicsmaster poses questions to unsuspecting members who must quickly formulate a 1-2-minute response. Here are questions I have heard: If you could travel through time, where would you go? What famous person would you like to meet—and why?

Members learn how to run meetings, conduct research, present findings, and use parliamentary procedures. They understand the value of being polite, arriving on time, and respecting other people's opinions. When they leave prison, these skills will help them build strong personal relationships and get and keep good jobs. They get this knowledge from their peers, not from a stuffy professor standing behind a lectern.

Several weeks before Christmas, one Gavelier described what happened that morning in his dormitory: men lined up to receive parcels from home: packaged snacks, pictures of loved ones, encouraging cards, "stamps" to send emails. But some men weren't getting anything. They had outlived friends and family or had no one in the Free World who cared. But it was the holiday season: two men had taken it upon themselves to distribute presents to those with none: a snack from the commissary, a card, a rumpled magazine or book.

Several days later, I attended a Christmas party at the Madison Correctional Institution. Instead of exchanging gifts, members hosted a "Secret Santa Claus." Speakers made positive comments about another man without naming him. The others had to guess who was being described.

Later, the Warden joined us. She spoke softly yet confidently, encouraging the men to keep their spirits up; for them, this was a difficult time. When she finished, they applauded, comforted by her words.

As I was preparing to leave, a middle-aged Black man asked if I would mentor him in creative writing. I said sure, but first I needed the Chaplain's permission.

On the way out, I asked the Chaplain if I could mentor a man in the Gavel Club. He shook his head. "If you do that," he said, "you'll be permanently banned from this institution."

To be continued in the next issue of *InFlow Magazine*.

See my [website](#) for more information about Prison Gavel Clubs.

### **About the author:**

Andrew Miller retired from a career that included endangered species research and university teaching. He now lives in north-central Florida, has two children, four grandchildren, volunteers in prisons, works with stained glass, and writes. His wife is a retired psychotherapist and a writer. Andrew is the Creative Nonfiction Editor of [Mud Season Review](#).

Find Andrew here: [AndrewCMiller.com](http://AndrewCMiller.com)

Andrew Miller

Tallahassee, Florida (FL), USA

*Photographs provided by Andrew Miller*