



## I Pledge Allegiance

*Through the benevolent work of The Voices of Freedom Gavel Club, a Toastmasters Club that operates in prisons, a grouping of inmates finds a way for their patriotism to endure...*



by: Andrew C. Miller

Early one January morning in 2019, Chuck Rabaut and I stood outside the control room at the Holmes Correctional Institution in Bonifay, Florida. After we signed in, a Correctional Officer passed us 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, COs will be all over the place.” Chuck’s cavalier remark didn’t put me at ease. Even holding the Personal Body Alarm unnerved me. What if I accidentally pushed the button? Worse yet, suppose I had to press it because of a riot or other disturbance?

After we were wanded and frisked, we walked out onto the prison compound: a sprawling collection of squat buildings surrounded by a ten-foot chain-link fence looped with razor wire. I followed Chuck along a short walkway to the chapel. Once inside, we entered a concrete block room with three small windows covered by heavy metal mesh. The entire front wall was covered by a line of inspirational murals, likely painted by an inmate. A lone wooden bookcase, crammed with religious and self-help books, sat by the door. The room was arranged for a meeting, with chairs and two-person tables facing a lectern.

We were at Holmes Correctional Institution to attend the *Voices of Freedom Gavel Club*, a Toastmasters club that operates in prisons. Toastmasters began as a series of speaking clubs organized in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Dr. Ralph C. Smedley, Director of Education at a YMCA in Bloomington, Illinois. He wanted to help young men speak effectively, learn to plan programs, and conduct meetings. Today, there are more than 14,000 clubs in 143 countries. Total membership, which has included women since 1973, exceeds 357,000.

About 30 men stood in small groups, talking or clustered around a sign-in sheet. Everyone wore blue jumpsuits with a white stripe running down each leg. Some looked to be in their twenties or early thirties, most were middle-aged, and a few were in their seventies. Several approached us, shook hands, and thanked us for coming. Chuck called many by name.

A short man with white hair called the meeting to order. He asked us to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. I've recited the Pledge thousands of times, starting in kindergarten and continuing through twelve years of school and beyond. I've pledged allegiance at civic events, graduations, Scout meetings, ball games, Fourth of July celebrations, and Veterans Day ceremonies. With one hand over my heart, I've witnessed a range of responses from pledgers. Most take it seriously, but some rise to their feet with a barely concealed groan, stumble over the words, or juxtapose "under God" with "indivisible." Sometimes, I'll admit to mumbling the words, allowing my mind to wander, ignoring lessons about the flag I learned in elementary school. But I've also felt guilty when men in uniform stood ramrod stiff and delivered the Pledge firmly, with authority and respect.

That morning at the Holmes Correctional Institution, the Pledge took on a different meaning. I was startled and captivated by the men's enthusiasm. They delivered those words in a deafening roar — shouted them — there was no murmuring, muttering, cast-down eyes, or slouching. Their words reverberated off the cement-block walls, the barred windows, and the gray linoleum floor. It felt like we were preparing to march down Main Street, rush to battle, or burst onto a football field. But no, I was in a nondescript room surrounded by incarcerated men. When finished, there would be no algebra lesson, Boy Scout meeting, fireworks display, awards ceremony, civic meeting, or line-up for diplomas. For these men, this would be one more bland day in another dull year.

I was shocked. How could they be so enthusiastic?

Several months earlier, I asked a friend about volunteer opportunities in Tallahassee. I had retired and wanted something more challenging than delivering Meals on Wheels or running bingo games at the Senior Center. "Call Chuck Rabaut," she said, "he does something in prisons."

The following day, I called Chuck. He explained about Toastmasters clubs in prisons and said he was looking for volunteers to attend their meetings. I told Chuck I knew nothing about prisons or Toastmasters and didn't think I could help. "Relax," he said. "Spend the day with me, and you'll learn all you need to know. I'll buy your lunch. I'll buy your dinner."

Chuck's passion for this work captured my interest, so I applied to become a volunteer. Several weeks later, after the Department of Corrections checked my background, I was ready to go.

Early one morning, we loaded boxes of notebooks, pens, and pamphlets into his car. Then, we drove 100 miles from Tallahassee to Bonifay. After the two-hour meeting at Holmes CI, we visited two more clubs at two other prisons. As promised, Chuck took care of my meals: lunch was a sandwich at a fast-food restaurant, and dinner was beef stew at the women's prison. I learned that he traveled more than a thousand miles during some weeks to visit Gavel Clubs. He brought in educational materials, hustled funds for expenses, and recruited volunteers. "The inmates run the meetings," he said, "I just answer questions and provide support." I asked him how he had the energy to do all this. We had been at it since 5:00 a.m. and wouldn't return until 10:00 p.m. "It must be done," he said, "when these men and women get out of prison, they must stay out."

When we met in early 2019, Chuck was 86 years old.

A typical Gavel club meeting (or Toastmasters club meeting) starts with a "Word of the Day," an "Educational Minute," or an "Inspirational Moment." Prepared and impromptu speeches follow. After all speeches, a member evaluates presentation style and content, an "Ah-Counter" tallies inappropriate words and sounds, and a Grammarian highlights colorful language, unique expressions, and poor word usage. Speakers get instant feedback, and everyone learns how successful meetings are planned and conducted.

After my first day with Chuck, I volunteered at several Gavel clubs in north-central Florida. In 2020, when COVID-19 spread into the United States, most prison clubs shut down. When they reopened in late 2021, I became a permanent volunteer at the *Out of the Blue Gavel Club* at Jefferson Correctional Institution in Monticello. Like Chuck, I attend their weekly meetings, bring in educational materials, and help set up and judge speech contests. Sometimes Chuck accompanies me to *Out of the Blue*, and sometimes I go with him to his clubs.

Speeches can address any topic, although off-color stories and foul language are discouraged. During an icebreaker speech, a new member typically shares information about where they were born and grew up, as well as their career, educational, or relationship experiences. I often hear men describe being physically, sexually, or verbally abused by family members, strangers, or while at school. Some speeches address topics such as nutrition, health, history, or the sciences. Information can come from library research or personal experiences. Impromptu questions can cover current events, favorite movies, or recent sporting events. Sometimes, speeches deal with prison-specific issues, such as "Should the National Guard serve as Correctional Officers," whether COs should put inmates in solitary confinement for defending themselves during a fight, or ways to make chow-hall food more palatable. I have never heard a man or woman provide details of a crime they committed, although they will often admit to making mistakes that led to their imprisonment.

As volunteers, we provide inspirational or educational comments at the end of the meeting. When it's Chuck's turn, he always jumps to his feet and races to the front. He often starts by asking men to tuck in their shirts or pointing out the difference between "podium" and "lectern." Sometimes, he explains they are enrolled in "U of F," and asks what that means. They usually assume he's referring to the University of Florida and yell, "Blue and gold." "No," he shouts,

“you are enrolled in the University of the Future!” Then, he explains they are learning skills that will help them succeed when they reenter society. I’ve never heard Chuck deliver long, philosophical monologues on the value of Toastmasters or the importance of volunteering. His high energy, quick smile, sincere dedication, and enthusiasm speak for themselves.

Although more than five years have passed since I heard the men at Holmes CI thunder out the Pledge, I still feel a stir in my heart and a tightening in my throat when I join inmates for this ritual — a feeling I never get while reciting the Pledge in the free world. I mentioned this to the *Northern Lights Gavel Club* President at the Wakulla Annex in Crawfordville. He passed my comments on to members, and several told me how they felt about the Pledge.

“When we recite the Pledge,” Kenneth\* said, “I stand as tall as possible — I love this country. I put myself in prison. That’s not America’s fault. We are thankful to be in an American prison and not in a foreign country where we might be treated worse. We have some rights here, and that is a blessing.”

Perry said, “I did what I did, and my sentence is the result. I don’t hold my actions against our flag or anybody else.” William had a similar response. “Although incarcerated, I love this country. Our flag symbolizes life, liberty, freedom of religion, and the pursuit of happiness. In prison, we still have a voice, although sometimes we have to scream a little louder.”

These people are committed to a country that hasn’t always treated them well. True, many committed serious crimes. However, poverty, lack of education, skin color, or sexual orientation could also be responsible for their long sentences. Inequitable sentencing guidelines, inadequate legal representation, and overzealous “law and order” politicians also had their part. Regardless, our Pledge of Allegiance speaks to ideals, not reality. The Pledge reflects what we want America to be, not always what it is.

When I hear the Pledge, I don’t think of fireworks displays, sporting events, awards ceremonies, or political speeches. I think of a drab Chapel or classroom in a flat, treeless yard encircled by a chain-link fence and razor wire. I picture groups of incarcerated men and women in baggy jumpsuits reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. As they say those words, some will think about the speech they are about to give or the speaker they will evaluate. They will be trying to limit their “you knows,” “ahs” and “ums.” When their two-hour meeting adjourns, they’ll head to the chow hall, the library, the rec room, another class, or back to the dorm. Many have been in Gavel clubs for years. Some will belong until they die.

*Pseudonyms were employed in this article.*

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