

### Flashback 2009

## Rural Voices Unlimited – A project to empower rural youth

In order to redress and overcome the lack of English Knowledge, the US Embassy in Sri Lanka along with the Rotary Club of Colombo West in association with Toastmasters District 82 has implemented the Rural Voices Unlimited (RVU) Project. This is a project funded by the US Embassy in Sri Lanka and promoted through the Rotary Club of Colombo West.

The U.S. Embassy is currently conducting programmes in the outstation areas for youth to learn English. However, there is a need for the rural youth also to apply these skills, to learn and improve their English communication, public speaking and leadership skills, which will empower them with the knowledge and confidence to communicate in English without inhibition.

English although being widely spoken in the urban areas of Sri Lanka, is still a language alien to many Sri Lankan youth in the outstations. The lack of English knowledge and communication skills is a major barrier for the rural youth to further their careers and future. The Toastmasters programme was chosen as the ideal vehicle to achieve these objectives. As the pilot project, five towns in Sri Lanka viz. Anuradhapura, Bandarawela, Batticaloa, Hambantota and Trincomalee have been chosen for RVU. The objective is to establish Gavel clubs ( i.e a pre-lude to a fully fledged Toastmasters Club) in these five towns and conduct extended Speechcraft pro-



grammes in them. On successful completion of this pilot project, it will be extended island-wide.

The inaugural sessions of the RVU were conducted simultaneously in the 5 cities on the 28th of November 2009. Upto now 5 simultaneous sessions have been held in the 5 cities. The students themselves are given the opportunity to conduct the meetings under the guidance of senior Toastmasters. The meetings will follow the agenda of a typical Toastmasters meeting with role playing of President, Toastmaster of the day, Table Topics Master, Round Robin Master, Ah Counter, Timer etc.... Each meeting also has about 10 prepared speeches and an equal number of impromptu speeches performed by the students. An important learning opportunity for the students from Senior Toastmasters is the feature presenta-

tion done at each of the meetings. The programme will take the students through areas of effective communications, public speaking, effective meeting conduction, leadership, effective speech evaluation, visual aid in public speaking etc. The programme will also teach students the proper usage of grammar/pronunciation, correct usage of body language and vocal variety etc.

The student participation has been tremendous and very encouraging; many of the students travel a great distance from their homes to the meeting often rising early in the morning. Due to the rarity of such programs in cities outside Colombo, the students have committed themselves to obtain the maximum benefits from the program.

Within a short span of 5 weeks the students in the respective towns have shown tremendous improvement in their levels of confidence due to their enthusiasm whilst practicing the skills taught. Over 150 students have taken part so far and obtained benefits of the program held every fortnight on Saturdays.

The organizers are confident that at the end of 6 months, the program will produce 150 students who can confidently express themselves before any audience or forum thereby enhancing their future employability and developing into useful citizens of their town and country.

## Sri Lanka and India together recognized as the Best District



Toastmasters of District 82, comprising Sri Lanka and India were adjudged the Best District by Toastmasters International, USA during the Toastmasters International Convention held in Connecticut, USA in 2009.

This is the second consecutive year that District 82 has been recognized as the Best District of Toastmasters International, USA. However, this year's award is especially remarkable considering the fact that it was the first time that the District was steered and guided towards the pinnacle of success by a Sri Lankan, Distinguished Toastmaster (DTM) Arunasalam Balraj. This is indeed a rare honour and a moment of pride not only for Toastmasters but Sri Lanka as a nation.

District 82 was bestowed with the "President's Distinguished District" in recognition of Superior Achievement & Dedicated leadership. This top position was keenly contested by China, Middle East, UK and USA.

On his return from attending the conven-

tion in USA, District Governor - District 82, Arunasalam Balraj said "It was the best honour bestowed upon District 82. Success of District 82 could be viewed in two ways. It was the Number 1 District in the World as well as No. 1 in Spirit".

The District also won the President's Extension Award for Outstanding Achievement in club extension and retention. This comprises the highest number (53) clubs in the world overcoming the earlier number of 51. "It was the largest number of clubs in a single year", said DTM Balraj.

The District was also honoured with the 20+ Award in recognition of keeping clubs alive; and for successfully motivating clubs to achieve & maintain charter strength. These are awards won in "the most ethical and alive" manner in the true sense of the words. This reflects the emphasis on qualitative aspects, where quality was not compromised to achieve the quantitative goals and objectives.

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ECU 29605 Printer code 002798 The 7th Edition

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