



## Congratulations Akili Atkinson

2020 International Speech Contest  
Semifinalist

Representing District 56 and Region 5

*“Having this amazing opportunity to represent District 56 on the world stage is providing me with a platform. I am blessed that in 2013 a friend of mine invited me to join her at her Toastmasters club meeting and the journey began.”*

*~ Akili Atkinson~*

We first saw Akili at District level during the Area N-22 Speech Contest on February 29<sup>th</sup>. We were delighted with her speech, her energy and passion. Akili’s perspective caused everyone in the audience to sit up and take notice.

Everything changed and we were thrown into a new era by the COVID-19 Pandemic. We all had to find a way to get our message across in a virtual way. Akili made choices on how to step up to this new challenge that showcased her grace, athleticism, intellect, and passion. We were more intrigued than ever as we watched her move on to the next level as a Division N International Speech Contestant winner. Akili made the comment that every win caused a surge of adrenalin which made her work just that much harder. She fine-tuned her speech, gathering insights from those around her, and won at the District level!

We were proud to submit Akili’s district winning speech video to the Region 5 Quarterfinal contest officials to be competing with 9

other Region 5 district International Speech champions. Once again, her message had an impact that catapulted her to the next level. Akili is representing District 56 and all of Region 5 in the Semifinals.

On August 24<sup>th</sup>, all 14 regions will showcase their international contest winners. To give a little perspective, there are 348,000 members in 143 countries divided into 14 regions. Each region represents 7–10 districts. There are over 30,000 members competing to be the Toastmasters International World Champion of Public speaking! From of all those contestants, Akili is 1 of 28 contestants who will have the opportunity to participate in the Toastmasters International Speech Semifinals contest.

In the interview with Akili, she was asked,

***“What brought you to Toastmasters?”***

Akili laughed and said, “This is an interesting fact... On July 12, 2013, I gave my ice breaker in Oklahoma and received the best speaker award. I was hooked!”

In 2013, I had just ended a 21-year long marriage as a military wife and realized I was going to have to stand on my own two feet. I was afraid and unsure how I was going to make this happen when a friend invited me to her Toastmasters club meeting. I have two grown children who share parts of my personality. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to witness parts of me living through their lives. It is very humbling.

I have a passion for young adults who are on the autistic spectrum. We teach young people in school how to behave and speak but we do not teach them how to speak in the workforce. A brief story if I may. One of our students was interviewing for a job. The weather was precarious at best. The person behind the desk, laughingly said, I hope you did not have to take a boat to

get here. Our student was unable to see the humor in what the interviewer said and missed making that connection that would have landed him the job.

It is not the responsibility of the interviewer alone to bend to the autistic spectrum, but with a little understanding, both sides can be deeply enriched.

I am the director of training at a non-profit organization that prepares broad spectrum Autistic adults for life in the world. We instill in them a desire to be a contributing member of society, setting them free to live independently and giving them hope for their future, I have found my life's mission. I realized to change the perception of autism in businesses, schools and the general public I needed to make my voice heard. Many of my students have not learned to speak for themselves, **I am their voice.**