**TOASTMASTER SPEECH**

**FOR**

**SHARON LYNN FORD**

**“CHOOSE JOY”**

**REVISED 5/2/18**

Hello everyone!!! I have to say, I am **ABSOLUTELY** thrilled to be here with all of you!!! Look at this crowd we have gathered!!! Although we might have come from various parts of the country, and although some of us had to travel from far and wide to get here, it really is great to see you, to reminisce, and to.... yes... share some **JOY**!! (**If there is anyone you’d like to acknowledge for organizing the event, you can do that here**). I would like to thank \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for bringing us all together. It’s both gratifying and reassuring to know that we are all connected.... that we all share a growing family tree whose roots grow deeper and stronger thanks to gatherings like this one, and I hope we stay in touch to share each other’s triumphs and challenges for years to come.

We’re all here for a reason...beyond the great food and the beautiful scenery... beyond catching up on personal current events and wondering why this one or that one didn’t show up... we’re here for reasons beyond what each other is wearing and “How did Aunt Betty **gain so much weight**??? (**Wait for the laugh**). We are here to show we care.... We’re interested... and we’re thankful for our connections to family, friends, nature, and the simple **joys** of life. Maya Angelou wrote a poem called “Black Family Pledge.” In it she states:

**“... Therefore, we pledge to bind**

**Ourselves again to one another;**

**.... To do all good things, knowing**

**That we are more than keepers of**

**Our brothers and sisters. We ARE**

**Our brothers and sisters.”**

Look around.... everyone in this room has an inner light and is **connected.** Each one of ushas the capability to share that special flame within each one of us.... of course we have to make sure to plan well, we **DON’T WANT** to have to call the fire department!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). All jokes aside, I am filled with joy as I see all of us together and as I think of our intertwined stories... our shared heritage... our combined **brightness**, and our collective hopes for the future.

Being here together shows us that we have an enduring strength beyond what we might believe are our own limitations. Because we are all connected, I think we can be inspired by each other... we can choose to find the beauty and goodness and miracles that are all around us. Don’t get me wrong... I am very aware of how tough life can be, especially with what’s going on in the world with all of the crime, disorder, unrest, and global threats in addition to our own very real personal struggles... we all have **A LOT** on our plates to worry about, but you know what? There’s always something to bring us some light. There’s always a miracle... no matter how small, waiting to be discovered. We just have to **WANT** to be senior to our struggles... we have to be willing and ready to smile... and that **IS NOT** easy. But we have to find a way... even when it seems impossible... to find and follow the light. There’s always a way to find it... we just have to be willing.

So... what do we do? It seems like people have forgotten how to smile... let alone laugh. We all tend to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders... or at the very least in our phones.... which have become more like our brains or our conscience... or that nasty little voice in our heads that repeats “**Oh no... not again**!” with each depressing email that comes in. (**Wait for the laugh**). But we have the power to fight those demons... because it’s **worth it**.

Joy has its benefits... remember according to the book of Proverbs, “A joyful heart is good medicine.” We can also take comfort in knowing that joy and delight adjust our chemistry for the better. They produce nitric oxide in our body which provides a good flow of blood, and that equals the flow of life. Joy helps us summon endurance and strength and it helps us get over upset. Of course the opposite... signs of low joy can rob us of health, make us more susceptible to burnout and failure, and can be a real slippery slope to dejection, depression, and lack of optimism.

But on the good side.... try to keep in mind what makes you happy... what gives you a reason to smile...does your face light up when you see your spouse, your child, your friend, or a beloved family member... like **ME**??? (**Wait for the laugh**). **I HOPE SO**!!! Because I sure am happy to see you!! Are you aware that **YOU** make people happy just to see **YOU**? That would be **ME** ...again!!. I say we start today to practice being kind to ourselves... by finding things.... sights... sounds... smells... that touch us and make us smile. Joy is waiting to be discovered all around us... we just have to be willing to look, and no one can do that for us.

Joy is available to us at any time, and as Nikki Giovanni has said, “There is always something to do. There are hungry people to feed, naked people to clothe, sick people to comfort and make well. And while I don’t expect you to save the world, I do think it’s not asking too much for you to love those with whom you sleep, share the happiness of those whom you call friend, engage those among you who are visionary, and remove from your life those who offer you... disrespect.” I think following this wisdom, along with honoring family, will bring joy. I am so grateful to have you in my life and I am blessed to have a family like this.... I would now like to share this affirmation with you...

**Affirmation: Joy is in my heart and in my life. I project joy to everyone I interact with. I live in a natural state of joyfulness. I choose to be joyful. I am willing to allow joy to enter my life. I clearly see joy in my surroundings. Joy is abundant all around me. I execute my daily tasks with joy. Joy builds within my soul & bursts into my life in unexpected ways. I joyfully honor the flow of life. I allow it to wash over me and deliver me to blissful places. Joy is mine right here right now. In each and every moment of my life, joy is a possibility. I choose joy now.**

**Thank you!!**