

Inmate elected club's governor

By Judi Nygren

He has been labeled a murderer. Prison officials know him as No. 27521. Fellow inmates call him the "Great Askia" after the African warrior chief. But as of last Wednesday, he answers to "governor."

Keith Askia Russ was elected Toastmasters' Area governor at an area-division speech contest in Lincoln. Toastmasters is an international organization designed to develop communication and leadership skills.

Because it was not his turn to attend a Toastmasters' event, Russ did not accept the governorship in person. Instead, he said, he waited at the dorm's front door for the inmates who competed in the contest to return with the election results.

"Yusif (an inmate) gave me the thumbs up sign and I clapped my hands...I was elated," he said.

As Area 7C's governor, Russ will oversee four clubs. The clubs include three Lincoln organizations and the prison's Innovators. The governorship requires that Russ attend at least two meetings at each club and write reports.

During his term, Russ said he hopes to reach many goals. He said that although he does not know the conditions of the clubs yet, he plans to deliver a state of the area address for his first club visit. Russ said he also wants to express the power he experiences through the club to other members.

During his term, Russ said, "There will be mistakes made, but nothing malicious...they'll be building mistakes."

Barbara Houghton, a club member and friend of Russ, said Russ will need civilian help to serve the club properly.

"Askia is hoping the administrators will give him passes for all his visits, she said. "But because of his status (life sentence), I don't see that happening."

Although Houghton said she thinks Russ needs outside help to do his job, she thinks he will be a good governor.

Russ enters his term with many Toastmaster accomplishments behind him. Among them is the Able Toastmasters' award, which is the club's second highest award. Russ also served as the Innovators' president in 1983. Under Russ' leadership, the club received the President's Distinguished award.

Russ became involved in Toastmasters through a friend in 1978, he said.

Once he joined the club, he said he skipped meetings to avoid responsibilities. But all that changed in 1980 when the club received its charter, he said. At that point, he said he became an active member.

Today, Russ said he realized the Innovators "are men of action. We have proven there is more behind our words than bad breath and crooked teeth."

Russ said Toastmasters has helped him overcome the speech problems he had when he entered prison.

Russ came to the prison with a ninth-grade education. He did not think he needed an education when he was young, he said.

"When I was young I was attracted to the false glitter and glamour of the streets," he said. "My only interest was feeling good, and feeling good meant being high."

Russ said he spent his youth in Omaha hustling and sometimes holding a job for a month or two.

At 17, Russ went to the reformatory on burglary charges and probation violations. He said the experience did not move him to change his life.

"I was young," he said. "and my blood was hot."

In 1973, he went to prison for first-degree murder. When he originally entered prison, he said he had given up hope.

"I didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel, and if I had any thoughts of seeing the end, it was of meeting the train head on," Russ said. "I would look in the mirror and ask, 'Do you like yourself?' and the answer usually came back, 'Well, no.'"

He decided he needed to change his life, he said, and in 1975, he met the woman who motivated him to make those changes.

The woman was a teacher at the prison's school, he said, and she encouraged him to do something with the Graduation Equivalency Diploma he already had attained.

With the teacher's assistance, Russ earned two associate degrees in general studies and business administration through Southeast Community College's prison program.

He started his college education by reviewing reading and comprehension skills, Russ said. Russ'

first college course was philosophy.

"I was so intimidated by the words and concepts the professor used, but I loved it," he said. "I squeezed out a C and that encouraged me to go on."

His efforts paid off. Russ was valedictorian of both his graduating classes. He said the first time he was valedictorian, his entire family showed up.

"I was so delighted, it inspired me," he said. "It kept me going because I know how much pain I have caused. I'll have a difficult time making it up to everyone, especially to Momma; but this may be a beginning."

Because he is serving a life sentence, Russ said he cannot make definite plans for the future. But he said he wants to continue his education at UNL.

Currently, he is working with a counselor to determine which fields would be best if he is given educational relief someday. The relief would allow Russ to live at a community center and attend school. Russ can get the relief if administrators vote for his commutation in 1985.

Russ said he thinks his chances for commutation are good, but his record has not gone unscathed. In December 1982, Russ and five other inmates were accused of initiating a strike among workers. They were sent to the adjustment center. After they went on a hunger strike, the men were returned to the dorms. All charges against him were dropped with the exception of a disorderly conduct violation.

Since the incident, Russ has returned to the trustees' dorm and is working in the prison school as a clerk. He makes \$3.05 a week for filing, typing and assisting in the office.

Russ may not be getting rich in prison, but he said his experiences in prison have helped him realize that he can do something productive with his life.

"When people think of prison, they think of rapists and murderers. I want to evolve above that," he said.

ELECTRONICS UNLIMITED

*CAR STEREO
*HOME AUDIO
*PORTABLES
*VIDEO DISCS

GATEWAY (INSIDE MALL) 467-5275
ALL MAJOR CR CARDS ACCEPTED

BECKER CPA REVIEW

Mr. Paul Beveridge (C.P.A.) will conduct a one hour sample class presenting our proven technique for passing the C.P.A. exam. Instructors will be available to answer questions.

Accounting Majors are cordially invited!

Saturday, April 28
10:30 a.m. YMCA
Board Room 4th Floor
430 S. 20th St.
Omaha NE.

A free buffet luncheon will be served. Reservations are not necessary but preferred. Come and bring a friend.

Call Collect (402) 392-1022

GRADUATE TO GOLD

Now Save \$25. on 14K gold College Rings.

"Also -- \$15 Off 10K"

Now's the time to think about your college ring. Not just any ring—a 14K Gold College Ring from ArtCarved. The karat gold jewelry that's designed and handcrafted for lasting value.

And now an ArtCarved 14K Gold College Ring is more affordable than you think. Choose from an entire collection of 14K Gold ArtCarved College Rings and save \$25. This offer is for a limited time only, so come in and see all the great ArtCarved styles with the custom options that can let you have the ring of your choice, the way you want it. So graduate in style. Graduate to gold!

DATE: **Today-Thursday**

TIME: **10:00 AM - 4:00 PM**

PLACE: **North Lobby Union**

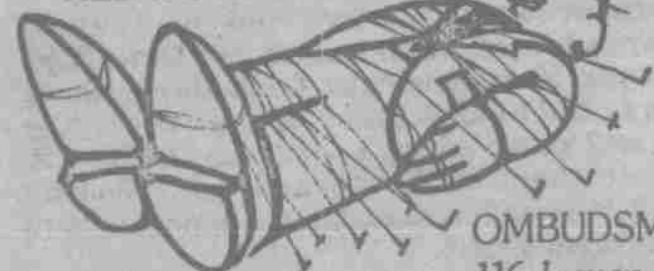
ARTCARVED CLASS RINGS, INC.

Deposit Required. MasterCard or Visa Accepted.

Nothing else feels like real gold.

© 1983 ArtCarved Class Rings, Inc.

Problems Have You
TIED DOWN?



We strive for confidential
and equitable resolutions.

OMBUDSMAN
116 Lyman Hall
472-3633