

It's no secret that, as students, we learn a lot from Speech and Debate. We learn about public speaking, critical thinking, and storytelling skills, that we carry for a lifetime and apply in almost every aspect of our lives. That's no secret. However Mrs. Alyssa Vaknin's teaching has surpassed any expectation a student could have, about what one hopes to learn from Speech and Debate. Karl Menninger said it best, "What a teacher is, is more important than what he teaches" While yes, Mrs.Vaknin has pushed students to be better competitors, she's also pushed them to be better people. The unique thing about Mrs.Vaknin is that she realizes that in order to prosper in Speech and Debate, students don't just need to be good at their events, they also need the tenacity and inspiration required to continue even when things get hard in both Speech and Debate and life. She fosters a family like environment, and ensures that her students are always there to encourage each other and to pick each other up when we fall. In that way, the things that Mrs. Alyssa Vaknin teaches don't only affect our ability to communicate but also our ability to empathize, our ability to stand up for ourselves, and our ability to pursue our ambitions. An example of where Mrs.Vaknin's influenced, not only her students, but also 600 other kids, was an event held at Bak Middle School of the Arts called Speak Up, naturally the events of Marjory Stoneman Douglas affected every student deeply, and Ms.Vaknin, through the help of the staff, gave her students the platform needed to express their emotions, frustrations, and calls for change. Through the creation of that event, Mrs.Vaknin gave the students the room needed to show their devotion and ambition, and truly make the show the voice of the kids. This is just one example of Mrs.Vaknin, proving to us that the effects of Speech and Debate are not limited to success in competition, but far surpass that. But I think most importantly, Mrs.Vaknin has taught her students respect and poise. See, as a woman in Congressional Debate, there is naturally a divide, and that frustrated me. To this day it still does, and when Mrs.Vaknin brought up the old phrase "A woman has to work twice as hard, for half the credit" I'd never understood what that meant, I was too focused on whether or not it was fair, to see that this idea pushed me to be better. She taught me that I may never get the recognition I may deserve, however I'm not gonna let myself become a victim of circumstance. It's very simple to get caught in the way that things affect you, but Mrs.Vaknin never let me lose sight of how my actions affected other people. She taught me the respect needed to support other people, not just myself, and the poise I needed to withstand, what could sometimes be a very painful process. For that I'll always admire Mrs.Vaknin, far beyond her skills as a coach and teacher, but also as a person, who understands that life and expectation can weigh on kids heavily, and that a teacher has the ability to alleviate that burden while also teaching them valuable skills that they may never learn in the outside world. My voice didn't mean anything before I joined Speech and Debate, at least it didn't mean anything to me, but Mrs.Vaknin chose to help me separate myself from the noise, to be articulate, and to be concise, and to be heard. So yes, Speech and Debate teaches every student a lot. However a coach is what makes a difference, and now while I'm in high school, I still carry the values that Mrs. Alyssa Vaknin instilled in me, and I am sure that if you ask any one of her past or present students they would say the same thing. The reality is that there are some people in this world that seek to crush the voices of others to make themselves louder, and when I write this letter, I show Mrs.Vaknin that I will carry her teachings from now to wherever I go, and that I will never crush someones else's voice to be louder. Mrs.Vaknin has far surpassed the expectation of teaching Speech and

Debate and has left something that'll outlast any trophy, she's left dozens of kids inspired, ambitious, tenacious, poised, empowered, confident, and respectful. She's left a legacy. And I hope that you honor her with this award, and solidify the legacy that her students carry in their hearts.