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To Whom It May Concern:

In August 2015, Michael Tristano moved to Arizona to pursue a doctorate in Communication and, at the recommendation of multiple colleagues, I jumped to hire him as an assistant coach at Phoenix Country Day School, even though we had never met. This was probably the best coaching decision I have made in my five years as a head coach.

Mike has been instrumental in helping our team grow and succeed at the highest levels. Four years ago, Mike joined a small team of 15 students, and even though our team now has more than 50 students, he still finds a way to form personal relationships with everyone he works with. Mike primarily coaches our platform speeches, and each year our students have attained national success under his tutelage. At NSDA in 2016: two oratories in the top-60, and the national runner-up in expository speaking. In 2017: one informative speech in the top-30. And in 2018: 13th place in Informative Speaking and ANOTHER national runner-up in expository speaking. This also omits all of the numerous interpretation pieces that Mike has helped coach to the highest levels of success.

From a practical perspective, working with Mike is seamless. In the past two and a half years, my wife and I have added two children to our family, resulting in my occasional absence from practice and even 2018 Nationals, as Pearl was born the day before it began in Ft. Lauderdale. When Mike is on campus or traveling with the team, I don't worry about what is happening at practice or at tournaments. Not only is he an excellent event coach; he also maintains extremely deep and professional relationships with members of the team and has the ability to manage the myriad administrative responsibilities that come with a large travel team.

More significantly, in addition to handling logistics, Mike is the type of person that should be working with high school students. As a competitor himself in both high school and college, he has years of experience with the events and the people that make up this extraordinary activity. He knows the type of coach he wants to be—and what he does not want to be. Coaching sessions with Mike are not only for practical purposes, but often serve as outlets for students to ask questions about Mike's own doctoral research, heavily in the realms of race, class, sexuality and gender—issues that students around the country are learning to parcel; but are often not lucky enough to know an adult willing to both listen and ask questions. With very little notice, I asked a few of our students to provide a sentence about what Mike's coaching has meant to them. None of them followed directions, but their verbosity speaks to their experiences with him.

**From our students:**

Mike Tristano made me see speech and debate as a worldly activity with implications beyond local competitions. His expertise, kindness, and care for what he said rubbed off on me and my other teammates. While Mike taught me that my words mattered, he also taught me when to speak, when to stay silent and, when to use silence to say the most. I am forever grateful for him and cannot think of a better person to receive this award!

-Sophia Casten, '18 (NSDA Top-30 in Informative)  
Smith College

Mike Tristano might be one of the most wonderful, caring, strong, hilarious individuals I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. There are two instances I had with Mike that I will never forget. The first one was when I couldn't decide whether to attend Nat Qualls my senior year or attend my college admit weekend. Mike pulled me aside and said, "Anika, let's go on a walk." We walked around campus for 30 minutes just talking about my career and journey in speech and debate and what Nat Qualls means to me. He also forced me to recognize my own strengths and good qualities and what I represented as a senior on the team. I will never forget that walk we took because Mike's opinion meant and will always mean everything to me, and in that moment, I knew I could and would never let him down. The second story that really stands out to me is after I dropped at Semis during Nationals and Mike sat with me in the rental car as I cried for 45 minutes about not breaking. Mike didn't say anything. He just sat there and I cried. But, that's the wonderful thing about Mike. He doesn't have to say anything for you to know he loves you and supports you and wants the world for you. And the one thing he said to me in that car that I will hold in my heart forever is when he said, "The one good thing about you not breaking is now I don't have to be your coach because now I get to be your friend."

-Anika Sanghvi, '18 (NSDA 13th Place in Informative Speaking)  
Georgetown University

Mike's role as head coach at nationals last year was irreplaceable. He stepped up into a pretty hard role, as nationals is always such a roller coaster! He deserved to get my trophy as much as I did, as he continues to push me as a platform kid and even as an interp kid. He treats me like an adult and never talks down to me. I love our conversations about race theory and all other kinds of topics we are both passionate about. I am so lucky to know him!!!

-Sophia Corridan, '19 (NSDA National Runner-up in Expository Speaking)  
Northeastern University

Mike is a consistent and reliable coach. He is always there for us and works tirelessly to pump us up, even when he's been judging PF for hours on end. One of his most memorable qualities is his signature "shay shay coolay" warm-up, always centering us and making us laugh. No matter what is going on, Mike tries to remind us that speech is fun and works to put a smile on our faces.

-Bella De Roos, '19 (NSDA 18' Top-60 in Duo Interpretation)  
Barrett, The Honors College at Arizona State University

Mike is one of the most passionate, courageous, creative, and incredible people I have ever met. After years of doing this activity, Mike has been able to evoke performances and emotions out of me in speech that no one else ever has. For instance, this year I have been doing an incredibly controversial piece and he has found numerous ways to convince me to enter uncomfortable situations and truly understand the gravity of the piece I'm taking on. Moreover, he has taught me that this activity is about so much more than earning a trophy. Being in Mike's presence has truly made me a more confident and passionate human being.

-Ryan Horlick, '20 (NSDA 18' Top-60 Duo Interpretation)

Mike is someone you can go to not only as a coach, but as a friend. He is always supportive, making sure that your ideas for a speech/piece are always acknowledged. If you're having a bad day, Mike is always there to make you feel better— he always wants you to be happy!

When I was a freshman, Mike made me feel like I was a part of the family. This is what makes Mike a great assistant coach: he is invested in our well-being. He works not only as a coach, but as a friend, making sure that the PCDS speech and debate

team stays a family.

-Ani Patel, '21

Additionally, for the past two years, Mike has served as the Director of Interpretation at UTNIF (after working there for many summers in various capacities). According to University of Texas director Randy Cox, "Mike Tristano is in a class all his own. Whether working with Middle School students or lecturing to college age competitors, he defines excellence in every role."

I have learned so much working alongside Mike, and I would not be the coach I am without him as a colleague. His ability to connect with our students, foster their talent and humanity, and motivate them to reach as high as possible, leaves him without a peer in our community.

As he prepares to leave Arizona after earning his PhD in the next few years, he will leave a massive hole on our team. However, the things that he has taught our students about writing and speaking with agency will hopefully travel with them as they leave the team and remain a part of the foundation of the team for years to come.

Most sincerely,

Nick Klemp