



Dear Administrator,

Making vivid the world of speech and debate is a challenge because every youngster is unique, but here is a distilled sketch of what this world is like.

The boy who came to my classroom several times a week for four years was always intense. Half-articulate, eyes glowing with a fierce spirit—you felt his passion immediately even if what he wanted to say wasn't always clear-cut. No one I ever coached loved Lincoln-Douglas Debate more, and no one lost more rounds. At the end of every tournament when handed his ballots, he would glance at them, ball them up angrily, and then with deft and casual scorn, jump shot them into any available wastebasket near or far. He loved philosophy and would sit at the back of the bus or the 12-passenger van (in those antique days when coaches still drove such) as we were voyaging through the night on our return from somewhere or other, making dark underlines under choice excerpts from Nietzsche, which later appeared tattooed onto his forearms. He blazed with idealism and generosity, and it was no surprise that he became an EMT tasked with using his strength and a counterbalancing passion to engage with the bodies of the needy, the broken, and the vulnerable in New York City.

And there was the girl who chose to sleep in late tournament mornings although she had made ardent promises that this next time she would show up punctually for the Saturday morning bus... yet rarely did. My wife would ask mildly but pointedly—why do you wait for someone like that? I shrugged because we both knew the answer. I forgot her for a while because new leaves grow on the tree of a school each year and each flower, each fruit, needs your newest and fullest attention. So years after when a letter tumbled onto my desk because she had written to tell me that every day in her job assisting a city council member she remembered what Extemp had taught her, I couldn't believe it for a moment. Until I did.

Never generalize. Never assume. Never presume you know someone else's heart and mind. When young people ask and are half-lost and half-listening, you have to remember they are actually in the midst of finding themselves and listening with all their might.

I can acknowledge that competitive speech and debate is flawed and draws on questionable aspects of the human condition where we judge, rank, and quantify what is unjudgeable, unrankable, and unquantifiable. For all the pleasure outounds and wins brought, those trophies have tarnished over time. And whatever I might have taught, I have learned more than I could have ever imagined. If speech and debate made me a more chastened human being, I hope that I have been able to pass on a few things to the vast and utterly distinct array of youngsters who have come through our program: Learn to listen as much as to speak; speak for those who cannot speak for themselves; and never forget the beauty and the urgency of the human story. Everyone deserves a voice, and the a priori respect that must precede that gift. If we can strive for this kind of world, then we can live in trust that our present precedes a better future.



Sincerely,

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