

DEBATE TOURNAMENT CHALLENGES PARTICIPANTS NOVA STUDENTS SPONSOR ANNUAL NATIONAL EVENT

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

While recent news reports indicated that many U.S. high school students couldn't find the United States on a world map, several hundred Broward County students recently challenged that finding at a debate tournament held at Nova High School.

"We pay more attention to issues in the world," said senior year student Darren Heitner of Hollywood who helped host the tournament at his school. "We make sure that we focus on what is going on."

Heitner admitted that participants who must debate such issues as the economy of Peru or the political situation in Chechnya are a minority. However, he said that he and others pay more attention to world issues than domestic topics. "Most politicians pay too much attention to domestic issues," he explained. "But world issues are very important and affect all of us."

Adam Lessne, a senior at Nova who lives in Pembroke Pines said that he debates difficult topics in a very competitive environment. "At a debate tournament, I will be given a current events topic and will have 30 minutes to prepare a seven minute speech," he said. Lessne, who is president of Nova's debate team, said that topics might include Aids in Africa, Welfare in the United States or European Union expansion.

Student debaters are not allowed to use a library or the Internet during that 30 minute preparation period. To insure that they are ready for any topic, they continually stock a file boxes full of newspaper and magazine clippings about hot world topics. "I'm always clipping articles," Lessne said.

Other students participate in mock congressional debates similar to the U.S. House of Representatives. "We choose which side we want to be on and then debate current issues like the Iraq issue," said Shawn Fandel of Weston who debates on the Nova team. "Participating in these debates helps to increase our ability to think," he said.

Others focus on poetry or dramatic readings in their competitive efforts. "In Oral Interpretation, we find published poetry or a short story that we like and present it in front of the judges for seven to ten minutes," explained Alexis Moseley of Miramar. "We are judged by our portrayal, our facial expression and our emotions."

Others prepare a play or a skit for presentation. "I developed a humorous skit on the complete history of the United States that I had to present in a few minute presentation," said Marc Hoffenberg of Tamarac who is on the debate team at JPT Taravella High School in Coral Springs.

There are many reasons for participating in debating. "It looks good on your transcript," said Ryan Sulak of Coral Springs, a junior at Nova High School. "People know that you

have stuck with something for three or four years and that you can speak in front of an audience.”

“You are dealing with the cream of the crop,” explained Scott Jacobson of Coral Springs who graduated from Nova last year and is now a student at Union College in Schenectady, New York. “Most of these students graduate with advance placement honors. They have the drive to learn.”

Jacobson was recently back in south Florida to judge at the Nova Titan Debate Tournament sponsored by Nova High School in Davie. Jacobson won several national debate championships while a student at Nova.

“The debate team has surrounded my son with the best quality students in the school,” said Harry Polsky of Sunrise whose son, Arthur, is a freshman at Nova. “The discipline gives him a good work ethic,” he said.

Polsky explained that his son has to arrive at school an hour or more early several days a week to practice and prepare for debate tournaments.

For the students, debating provides an opportunity to widen their horizons as well as their friendships. “In debate, you meet people like yourself,” Heitner said. “You find people with the same interests that you have.”

Debating is a major event at the Nova school, with 200 students participating according to Sandy Kalbach of Coconut Creek who teaches English and debate classes. Kalbach teaches first year debate classes that all students who want to be on the debate team must take.

The school hosts the Nova Titan Tournament every year, drawing 700 student debaters from all over Florida and as far away as New York and Massachusetts.

“Hosting the tournament is a lot of work, and the students do most of it,” explained Lisa Miller of Cooper City who is the school’s debate coach. “We draw students from all over because they must participate in local debate tournaments in order to qualify for major national debates such as the Tournament of Champions held each year at the University of Kentucky.”

Nova’s students do not participate in debates at their own tournament, but provide all of the logistic services such as providing meals, arranging hospitality and organizing the judges, according to Barbara Lessne of Pembroke Pines whose son, Adam, is the president of Nova’s debate team.

Students also tabulate the results of each debate. “They are here until midnight during the tournament getting all of the results together,” Lessne said.

“The parents and students raise all of the funds for the tournament,” Lessne explained.
“We approach physicians, dentists, stores, businesses and other people for donations.”

Lessne said that several area restaurants donated food for meals and snacks for all of the participants.

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