

Rocky Mountain News
October 18, 2008

High school debaters in training for verbal fisticuffs

By Nancy Mitchell

In the dark of the early morning, while most of the city is sleeping in, Jumayah Brown will be praying that she makes it through today without stuttering and Teague Harrison will be reminding herself to breathe.

Jessica Keys, the girls' classmate at Manual High School, will be hoping there are no cute boys to distract her at Denver's first Urban Debate League tournament.

"I'm most nervous that I'll get up there and I'll have what I need to read and I'll be looking at it and I'll look up and I'll go, uuuuhhh," Jessica, who's 16, said, mimicking a face freeze. "I'll blank out and I'll start to sweat and my hands will start to shake and I'll go, I've got to sit down now."

Jumayah, her partner in debate, shakes her head as the two begin laughing Thursday in Charlie Smith's classroom at Manual: "She's on my team," she says in mock sorrow.

Students from four city high schools - George Washington, Manual, Martin Luther King Jr. Early College and Thomas Jefferson - are participating today in the first of six debate contests this year, the launch year for the Denver league.

'The Great Debaters'

Few of the teens knew much about debate before they joined the teams three to four weeks ago, except perhaps for seeing Denzel Washington's recent movie *The Great Debaters*.

Washington plays the role of a professor in Marshall, Texas, who coached the Wiley College debate team to the first debate between U.S. students from white and black colleges and ultimately to face Harvard University's national champions.

Mostly, the teens say they like to argue, often in class, often with their teachers.

"My teachers told me I should join because I'm always arguing and I could keep an argument going for a long time," said Ramon Wise, an MLK sophomore whose smile could mean trouble for Jessica and Jumayah.

Even so, the stereotype of the typical debater - white suburban geek wearing a pocket protector - had to be overcome.

"When they first announced it at morning meeting (at Manual), I was like, 'Are you serious? Ain't nobody going to join that,' " said Jumayah, who had not seen *The Great Debaters*.

But teachers at MLK and Manual put up posters asking questions such as "Should school uniforms be required?" and "Should high school students have more privileges than middle school students?"

"Our optimistic number for our first meeting was two or three," said Smith, who coaches the Manual team with teacher Andrew Kearl. "We had 16."

Kearl shrugged: "Kids like to argue."

Fueling a trend

A growing number of middle and high school students in urban schools apparently do.

Begun in 1997 in Atlanta, the national Urban Debate League has grown swiftly in its campaign to seed debate teams in mostly minority, mostly poor schools.

Denver and Dallas are the latest cities to join the effort, which is now established in 18 cities and more than 300 high schools. The National Association of Urban Debate Leagues says more than 37,000 students have competed.

"I only was able to go to college when I did because I had a debate scholarship," said Roberto Corrada, a law professor at the University of Denver who is co-chair of the Denver league's advisory board.

"I come from a large family of six kids and there was no way college was going to happen without me working first and saving up some money on my own," Corrada said of growing up in Austin, Texas. "I went to college for free by being on the college debate team. I very much feel I am where I am today because of that."

Corrada and Rico Munn, head of the Colorado Department of Regulatory Affairs, are co-chairs of the Denver league's advisory board and were key to bringing it to Denver.

Rigors of debate

"Unfortunately, debate in this country has essentially been left to kids in suburban schools and . . . to higher socio-economic classes because of the level of research it takes and the level of access to resources," said Munn, a lawyer and former debater.

"What the Urban Debate League tries to do is to level the playing field."

In Kelli Lesh's classroom at MLK on Thursday, Jessica Clark plunked down big black tubs containing files, one tub for each debate team.

Inside were the core research documents for this year's debate topic - renewable energies - and Clark, the Denver league director, was ready to dispense advice.

"This is a trick, a very secret trick that I only know because I've been doing this for 20 years," she said.

The six debaters, seated around the room, leaned in closer.

"Rebuttal is not about the evidence, you're just going to put everything together in a way that makes sense to the judge," she said. "Why your case is important, why your plan is such a good idea."

Sophomore Marilyn Calderon took a stab: "Because it will save the polar bears?"

Clark nodded, "Why is that important?"

"Because you want your grandchildren to see them?" Marilyn asked.

Clark nodded again.

"This is where it's important to make the judges cry, talk about those polar bears," she said. "You're performing at this point."

A prof's advice

Debate is not for the faint of heart or the easily fatigued. As Clark, Lesh and co-coach David Shanks explained the format for today's tournament, their diagram began to look like an algebra equation: 8 1AC, 3 X, 8 1NC, 3 X, 8 2AC, 3 X, 8 2NC, 3 X.

That translates to - the first affirmative speaker gets eight minutes, followed by three minutes of cross-examination, followed by the first negative speaker who gets eight minutes, and so on.

"I am suffering from anticipation," deadpanned sophomore Stefan Keith, Ramon's debate partner.

Over the next school year, the four schools and possibly more - West High School is recruiting - have scheduled five tournaments culminating in a city championship in March at DU.

The debaters will continue to hone their research and debate skills on the same topic, renewable energies. Their case file will grow to 24 files totaling more than 540 pages, with headings including "Nuclear Power negative" and "Social Ecology Critique affirmative."

"The words might be big and I don't understand them but I've got my trusty dictionary next to me," Jessica said Thursday at Manual, "and I'm looking up the words and writing them down on a piece of paper like, that's what that word means and that's how you pronounce it."

If research from other city debate leagues holds true, more than 75 percent of the Denver participants will go on to a four-year college. The new debaters talk about scholarship opportunities and Chicago, the site of the national debate tournament, in hushed tones.

But today, they are in the nerve-racking throes of their first tournament. Corrada will be judging one of the four rounds.

Asked for advice for the new debaters, he laughed and said he threw up after every round of his first several tournaments.

"It will get better," Corrada said. "It's tough at first but you're going to learn and you're going to calm down and you're going to know what you're doing and it will get better."

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The competition

Four Denver high schools will compete in the first Denver Urban Debate League today at Martin Luther King Jr. Early College, 19535 E. 46th Ave.

Here are times:

- * **Round One:** 8:30 a.m.
- * **Round Two:** 10:30 a.m.
- * **Round Three:** 1 p.m.
- * **Round Four:** 3 p.m.
- * **Awards Ceremony:** 5 p.m.

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