

Debate? Who?? Me??

By Tiffany N. Thompson (PHAA 2000) [Copyright by the author]

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Okay, breathe!! I internally screamed at myself. But my lungs refused to cooperate, my breath came sporadically, and I could feel approximately 2 million odd butterflies trying to escape their captivity inside my stomach. Mentally, I did a frantic scramble, desperately trying to remember who I was, where I was, why I was here, and what I was about to do. Okay, name, Tiffany Thompson, age seventeen. Day....um, December 4th 2000? My eyes were glued to the young man after whom I was to speak. Place: Elverson Community Church and I am about to stand up and deliver a speech on why the Sixteenth Amendment should be repealed. Why am I doing this??! Before I could answer my own question, the young man finished, sat down, and with an odd sinking feeling I willed myself up out of the chair, and over to the podium. To this day I'm still not exactly sure what I said, Time has kindly and mercifully blurred my memory. But I do know this.....I was lousy. My speech was taken up with numerous eloquent and flowery "Ums" and "likes." It was a grateful and much humbled Me that slid into my seat after the end of the speech. That was awful, terrible, humiliating! I berated myself. And yet I had submitted willing to this public torture known as, debate. How am I ever going to survive this day? My mind reflected back through the span of time to mid-September, the starting point of my debate experience.

When I arrived at the Communicators For Christ conference 1999 I was, shall we say, less than enthusiastic. The only reasons I had even considered coming were:

1. My former drama teacher, Mrs. Kuehne, and her daughter, Shaina were attending.
2. My mother had 'strongly suggested' I attend.
3. And most importantly was that each person was to dramatically present a piece of some kind.

Now, drama of any kind is near and dear to my heart, hence, my presence at the conference. But I was suspicious and cautious. The very mention of the word debate conjured up images of presidential and political figures, waxing eloquent on abstract philosophies and mindless rhetoric. Boring, long, and intimidating.

The rest, as they say, is history. I quickly learned that debate was not as boring as it sounded, and could actually be fun. Within weeks I was attending a local debate club, and the rest of my senior year was spent traveling all over the state and country, just so I could to stand up in front of people and humiliate myself some more. And I loved (almost) every minute of it.

The world of public speaking which opened up for me is truly one of the best things that happened to me. There were two main ways in which it benefited me. The first area was confidence. Through debate I was able to develop a confidence that up till that time I had only had around my own family, or in drama class. It was the Jekyll under the Hyde, so to speak. The wall flower coming off the wall. How shy and introverted was I? So shy, I didn't like calling the operator for directory assistance because I wouldn't know what to say.

The second area was critical thinking. Suddenly I discovered that the organ known as the brain had a purpose for something other than just doing my Algebra. I could use it to research and speak intelligently on such complex topics as the income tax. Debate stimulated my brain with such a rush of thinking, that soon I couldn't do without it, and the more I had, the more I realized I enjoyed and wanted it.

So perhaps you are thinking at this point: Okay this was great experience, but how is it going to help my kids? For a moment, allow me to digress and relate some background information. This world of debate and individual speaking events was brought about with the aid of Michael Farris, former President of HSLDA, and his daughter, Christy Farris Shipe. Looking for ways to further the skills of analytical thinking and communication, they founded HSLDA policy debate, adding in later the individual speaking events. Just this past year, due to the overwhelming response from the homeschool world, it became a separate entity known as the National Christian Forensics Communication Association (NCFCA), complete with competitions on the local, state, and national level.

But returning to my main question: what will public speaking do for your children? I will start with the assumption that you desire that your children might be well-educated in life skills. And here lies the basic and crucial point of debate. One of the most necessary life skills is communication. Communication is a vital part of the workplace, the home, and relationships. But let us make the distinction between 'speaking' and 'communication.' Webster's dictionary defines 'To speak' as: "To utter words." 'Communicate' on the other hand is defined as: 'To succeed in conveying one's meaning to others.' We as humans have been speaking since Time first began. It is an essential part of life and our society as a whole. But what good will this skill be if it is not accurate? From the time they are born, children learn to speak, but are they taught to communicate effectively, and make others understand exactly what they have to say? If a child were acquainted with only basic addition, would you consider him well-equipped in the mathematics department? No, the skill would have to be refined further to be put to any practical use in the adult world. The same is true of speech. With only the basics an adult can survive, but he or she will not thrive, or be able to impart their ideas and thoughts clearly.

This is the skill that NCFCA seeks to develop-- to take the basics of speech, and through debate and individual events, craft the skill of effective communication. Perhaps you might be skeptical. "It might work for you, but MY child can hardly speak to strangers." Let me reassure you it is for precisely these type of children which public speaking helps the most. I have seen young teenagers, hardly able to make eye contact with me, transformed into confident, articulate young people. No, it was not a miracle that took place overnight, but a process -- a long, difficult, at times even tearful, process. But in the end the new found confidence in self, and the budding skills of communication, well outweighed the struggle.

For those of us who are Christians there is an additional consideration. In the Bible it says: "Be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you." Yet if we cannot communicate, we will be unable to convey this hope, and thus we shall be ineffective witnesses.

So I would heartily urge those of you out there to consider this worthwhile activity. The results will surprise even you.

In case you are wondering-- yes I did survive my first debate tournament. Little did I know that day what lay ahead. The experience I would gain, the confidence I would develop, and the friends I would make across the country. The best was yet to come.

For those interested in more information, visit the NCFCA website at www.ncfca.org.

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