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Bellaire debate team earns honor as nation's best

Members defeat Hawaii squad to bring home trophy and scholarship money

By BETTY L. MARTIN

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Bellaire High School debate coach Russell Rach's forensics team is the nation's last and best argument in support of debate.

After a year of wins from debating both sides of the year's question from contest sponsors Bickel & Brewer Foundation and New York University, the six-member Bellaire team won the National Policy Forum in New York City on April 26.

The team members argued successfully on whether the United States should substantially increase its AIDS/HIV public health assistance to Sub-Saharan Africa.

They left their final competitor — Colleyville Heritage High School of Colleyville — in the shade, returning to Bellaire triumphant with a large silver trophy and \$10,000 in scholarship money.

It was the fourth year in a row the team was among the final four teams throughout the country selected to go to the New York finals. But it was the first time Bellaire won the top prize, said Rach, the debate coach for five years.

Busy journey

It's been a busy journey for the mixed-grade team this year. Some members, such as team captain Satish Vemuri, 18, was on the team that went to New York in 2007 and knew the drill from last October through the post-competition banquet.

Others, such as sophomore Chelsea Zhang, were first-timers to debate.

Team members are seniors Vemuri, Jenny Fan, Vijay Kasschau; juniors Shanna Chu and Andrew Garbarino; and Zhang.

The team nominally included senior Chris Fan, who helped with last-minute research.

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"This year we really had a team of dedicated individuals, everyone putting everything they had into that round, " Vemuri said.

Garbarino said it felt great to return to school and see its large outdoor bulletin board proclaim *BHS Debate: First in the Nation*.

Their work started in October 2007, when Bellaire's team was among more than 100 high schools in 26 states that submitted essays on the year's topic.

In January, the number of teams was reduced to 16, and then Bellaire's team was blindly picked by judges — who didn't know the names or origins of the essays they were reading — to be one of the "Elite 8" in the national competition April 24-26.

Upon arrival in New York, Bellaire was paired with another final four team and tasked with challenging the two opposing teams.

Having competed in e-mailed arguments, this time members had to think on their feet in oral debates to questions posed by a panel of judges from the worlds of debate, business and politics.

In the first of the final rounds, two teams were excused, leaving Bellaire and the team from Hawaii.

Bellaire learned of its win during a banquet for the four participating teams, including Hawaii's Kahuku High and Intermediate School and Wellington (Fla.) High School.

Keynote speaker was U.S. Southern District of New York Judge John G. Koeltl.

Members also met the judges, including William Brewer, debate founder and co-chairman of the sponsoring Bickel & Brewer Foundation; John Sexton, president of New York University; Scott Wunn, secretary, National Forensic League; and Lenny Gail, National Association of Urban Debate Leagues chairman.

Kasschau said the one thing that put Bellaire over the top this year was the team's well-researched arguments.

"We really went in depth on what we had to do," Kasschau said. "It was a little intimidating, being judged by the people who write the articles that we research."

He said that while the school and the team members may benefit from a little scholarship money, no one on the team was — or is — in the debate club because of it.

"I don't think any of us did it for the money," said Fan, who is planning to major in public policy at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton business school. "This has prepared me more for college than anything else I've done."

Zhang said she feels that this year, she only aided the efforts of harder-working juniors and, especially, seniors who spent extra hours each week and on weekends researching various aspects of the topic question.

"They stayed really late after school, they go home really late," she said. "Next year, I'm going to be in debate. This is a really good program."

Students already know what the topic question will be next year and have already started their research, Zhang said.

"The policy debate will be on alternative energy," she said.

"Our coach has already been talking to us, showed us a video to get us thinking, and yesterday we brainstormed how to increase U.S. commitment and incentives from different countries to invest in alternative energy."

Garbarino said that despite the hard work this year, he also plans to return to the team in 2008-09.

"It was a lot of work, a lot of dedication, a lot of late nights, but it feels great," Garbarino said. "I hope to work as hard and am hoping to go for a repeat next year."

Rich history

Bellaire has had large squads since the debate program began in 1956, Rach said.

After the program's first year, Bellaire teachers Mollie Martin and Cecil Pickett shared the National Forensic League Coach of the Year prize.

They were followed by Bill Henderson and then David Johnson, who remained for 30 years.

"We're standing on the shoulders of giants," Rach said. "Some years, there are kids who have joined the squad whose parents or brothers or sisters were Bellaire debators."

A Bellaire debator who didn't enter the contest this year — Anna Meyerson — was part of this year's team and her father, Alfred Meyerson, was on the Bellaire forensic team, Rach said.



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