

Aurora students come out on top at World Debating & Public Speaking Championships



Local students conquered the world at the recent World Debating & Public Speaking Championships in Canberra, Australia.

Students the world-over converged on the Canberra Girls Grammar School last month for the championship which saw Aurora residents Ethan Wahba and Millie Steinmann, both of The Country Day School in King, take home the trophy in Interpretive Reading and Persuasive Speaking, respectively.

The Championships, which took place April 14 ? 20, was the scene of a number of firsts for Country Day School (CDS) and their storied Debate team. Wahba and Steinmann, joined by fellow student Sarah Croxon, competed in a total of eight finals at the Worlds, the most the school has fielded in individual events.

Overall, Wahba placed third in the overall championships, Steinmann ninth, and Croxon 18th.

?All three of them did amazingly well,? said CDS's long-time debate coach Kersten Wyndham-West. ?It's tough to even make one final, but to make two or more finals is incredible and all of them did that. Additionally, we have never had two students win their individual categories in the same year, and all three made it to eight of the possible 12 finals. That is a record for CDS.?

That excitement was still in the air when the three students sat down with The Auroran on Thursday to share their experience.

Steinmann, who aced the Persuasive Speaking category, says she chose Retirement as her topic for the Nationals, but tried a fresh approach for the Worlds, zeroing in on the impacts of highly-caffeinated energy drinks on students.

?I thought, what was going to make the kids listen the most because when the students are listening, the judges perk up too because they want to see the entire audience engaged,? she says, noting that one area of particular concern was how these drinks are marketed ?negatively? towards kids ?and the ever-increasing normalization in grocery stores and in vending machines at school.?

?It is covering up the health crisis that is actually going on with high amounts of caffeine,? she says. ?I looked at different health studies, a lot of different case studies of different teenagers who have been affected by different energy drinks, by appetite suppressants, or using them as a way to mix them with alcohol. I looked at the different stakeholders for students foremost in my research, but what I really tried to do in this speech is to make it funny. I try to use comedy in order to make them realize that we can

think it is just a fun drink that people have occasionally and it is often compared to a soda or just a drink you have occasionally, but, in reality, it is actually something that people are getting addicted to. I thought by making them laugh at first and then hitting them with the hard-hitting question of why are we normalizing this? I thought that would persuade them.

?Instead of [going through] different consequences, I did different stakeholders of who was going to be affected by the drinks. Instead of saying the caffeine used in energy drinks [is] negative because they are used in these different cases, I asked, ?So, what are the different types of teenagers who are going to be affected by this??"

For his part in the Persuasive Speaking category, Wahba looked at the impact of a shortage of air traffic controllers ? ?I chose this because for this competition almost everyone I was presenting to would have flown hours and hours from across the world? ? and how this shortage has eroded public safety.

In the same field, Croxon looked at the ins and outs of tipping and gratuity culture, with a particular focus on North America and how it has ramped up in the aftermath of the Global Pandemic.

?When restaurants and bars started closing, a lot of customers felt like maybe giving employees extra tips to kind of substitute for their lost wages that they would have been getting if they were open, but now it is four years later and obviously we're out of the pandemic,? she says. ?It is still a very prevalent thing and it keeps on evolving. The amount that people are expecting to tip just keeps growing and it's at a point where you go to Starbucks and you try to tap your debit and you're getting pre-set thing with three options. A lot of people are being guilted into it, and that isn't right.?"

Speaking on the topic, she compared North American tipping culture to those in other parts of the world. She didn't come down on one side or another, she notes, but brought context to the table.

?By the end of the speech, I took the stance where there are some people in the world who are never going to stop tipping, no matter how financially well-off they are,? she says. ?People are going to feel like they want to tip, or it is a financial burden on them, especially with things like inflation going on [and] that is not something we should be making them feel guilty about and people should basically be able to do what they want in terms of leaving a gratuity.?"

In addition to Persuasive Speaking, Wahba's performance in the Interpretive Reading category came out on top. Selecting the short story, ?Going Grapefruit? by Ian Richards, which touches upon an average man's life and how it's upended by a car accident and a resulting brain injury which made grasping for the right words difficult, the student really tried to communicate the emotion in the story.

?One thing that really came through above all else was after performing the piece I really understood the illness, the vital importance of compassion towards everyone, especially towards those who struggle to communicate,? he says. ?One piece of feedback I received from a judge who has been judging for a really long time, was that she had heard the piece performed a few times but it never really stood out to her. She goes, ?The way you performed it, the emotion and tone you had with it, it felt like I was in the room with this character?. It truly felt like I was watching him go through all these experiences and feeling it right next to him.'

?I think at the end of the day that was what enabled me to be successful because there is kind of a moment in my reading where the character has a moment of growth and he's finally able to choose the right words. When we were performing in Grand Finals in front of everyone in the competition, there were actually a bit of a gasp in the room when he got to his words. That's what made it special for me and why I was able to do well ? people were so invested in this guy's character, so at the end where he was finally able to overcome that hurdle it was like the crowd was overcoming it with him.?"

Through the whole process of competing in Canberra, the students agree that one of the things they came home with ? in addition to some hardware ? was the importance of gaining a global perspective from their peers around the world.

?I feel in Canada and America we get such a one-sided approach on things,? says Wahba ?Everyone, even when they have different

views, we're still kind of in the same ideological spectrum. When you're meeting people from Asia, when you're meeting from Africa, Europe, you're getting all these different perspectives on issues from all across the world. I had several times through the competition where I would be talking to someone who came from a completely different culture and their way of thinking about things was so different compared to what we have in North America. I think getting that experience, the ability to talk to all these different people, is something you can only get at a global competition.?

Adds Steinmann: ?Especially with persuasive speaking and listening to people's speeches about what they feel like is a problem in the world, how we think we should solve it, as well as debate ? we're all trying to solve an issue and arguing about what is the best path forward as us for a society ? I found it was really interesting to see, especially given that a lot of the competitors want to be lawyers or work in government, we're all working together to make society a better place. The ability to work together and talk to people across the world, seeing other people's opinions about what they think is a problem, what their country's policies are, was really important.?

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