

SKIP RUTLEDGE: Relating Through Debate

by Eric Yates (02)

Public speaking is the number one fear for a majority of Americans – even over death. The nervousness. The isolation. The spotlight. Admit it: it's enough to give you a quick chill. Now imagine doing it while a judge is giving you a formal critique. Considering this, what the speech and debate team at Point Loma Nazarene University has accomplished since 2002 is all the more impressive.

Seeing the enthusiasm that Dr. Skip Rutledge, professor in the Department of Communication and Theatre and director of forensics, displays while simply talking about PLNU's debate students leaves little doubt why the team has been so successful over the past few years. It all starts at the top.

Few can argue with these results: a National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) yearlong season sweepstakes national championship for the 2006-07 season, seven first-place sweepstakes wins out of 11 tournaments entered this year, and four NPDA sweepstakes national championships in the last five years. That's more than success; it's a full-blown dynasty.

Rutledge attributes Point Loma's achievement to educating, motivating, and

relating. Educating is a baseline requirement for success: students need knowledge about a broad range of topics and must learn certain skill sets to be top speakers. Motivating means helping students see the value of going that extra mile. The game is often won by those who work hardest.

"And relating," Rutledge explained, "might be the most important part. It entails recruiting, encouraging, and developing relationships. It's about helping the students adjust to other elements of campus life and also relating to other coaches and teams in a cooperative way."

Rutledge is impressed every year with the team's level of talent and hard work, as well as the way those involved are changed. Despite their various majors, his debaters share certain traits – they are articulate and competitive, and they have good presence, confidence, and work ethics.

"In just three months, I've seen students become more self-assured. They become critical thinkers who can formulate analytical arguments at the drop of a hat. Students can translate that hard work into their other classes, grad school, teaching assistant positions, and interviews. Job interviews are a breeze – they've



faced intense pressure already, in front of the best and brightest in the country, so being grilled by someone who only wants to know if this person is a good fit for the company is a piece of cake."

"I entered PLNU as a painfully shy 18-year-old. I was taking the dreaded freshman speech class when Skip saw something in me that I would have never seen in myself. To my surprise, he asked me to join the speech team," said *Viewpoint* creative director Michele Corbett (95). "Having someone believe in me in this way shaped who I was to become, which includes teaching college speech classes myself. Skip saw what I could be when I could only see my present condition. Having a mentor like him changed the course of my life."

A professor at PLNU since 1989, Rutledge took over the reins of the debate program in 1991, following Dr. Bud York. He had previously worked as a San Diego Unified Port District lease negotiator, but he could never shake his passion for debate. Recently, Rutledge signed a

contract with IDEA publications to write a textbook on "How to Successfully Coach Speech and Debate." The book should be completed by August 1, 2008.

While the team has enjoyed much success, Rutledge insists that winning is not the only goal. It's also about ministry, especially while competing against larger secular schools.

"Debate is all about the search for reason and truth. It's nice to have a chance to open people's eyes who see Christianity as a crutch, thinking that, as Christians, we don't have to rely on reason. In reality, God is the creator of reason, not an opponent of it," he said. "Because we are a Christian institution, other teams and coaches get to see actualized, living, three-dimensional Christians going through life and struggling with things, just like everyone else. And at the end of the day, how do you hope to ever resolve anything if you don't understand another person's search for truth between often conflicting positions or completely different value systems?" ⊕