

# BEYOND AN EXPANSION OF PRIVILEGE: NEW URBAN VOICES AND COMMUNITY ADVOCACY

by  
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True diversity cannot be achieved without discomfort. And so it is that the high school policy debate establishment anxiously observes the emergence of thousands of new young urban voices queuing up for their turns behind the podium. Muted conversations from both sides of the class divide detail the challenges before us. Coaches of established programs from privileged communities often view the new styles and different accents of the new urban debaters as intellectual dilution. New coaches at emerging Urban Debate League schools observe a bewildering array of traditional tournament procedures and competitive mores and see racial and class hostility toward urban kids already weighed down with societal disapprobation. What-  
ever shall we do?

Not to worry! As Little League baseball programs all over America have amply demonstrated, even well-meaning adults have an annoying tendency to really get in the way of a kid having fun. And frankly, the reason most kids work so hard at mastering policy debate is because the activity is fun for them.

As facilitators of forensic competition, we adults need simply to promote the competition, explain the rules and get out of the way. The kids will do the rest. We need no special guidelines or allowances. A level playing field would be nice, but it is not mandatory. The genius of youth is that they are able to devise creative and innovative ways of making competition both fun and equitable if they can escape the heavy handed imposition of adult authority.

Diversity in high school policy debate is rapidly becoming a fact of life. Spurred on by actions such as those of the Open Society Institute, students and teachers from traditionally underserved schools have gotten a foot in the policy debate door and that door will not be allowed to close again. This genie is truly out of the bottle. And as Brent Farrand recently noted, policy debate will be truly enriched by the contributions of new generations of urban debaters.

But allow me a cautionary note dur-

ing our celebratory euphoria.

As I have argued elsewhere, the reality of George Washington is not the reality of George Washington's slaves. One's point of perspective is everything. And nowhere is this observation more important than in the effort to anticipate (and to some extent guide) outcomes occasioned by the inclusion of thousands of young students from depressed areas of this country among the ranks of high school policy debaters.

The overriding questions are these. Toward what end do we labor to facilitate the entry of new urban debaters into the policy debate arena? And how shall we measure the success of our efforts to insure that the benefits of policy debate are extended to new urban debaters?

This brings us back to the matter of perspective. Many have argued that the test of our efforts should be whether participation in policy debate results in improvements in the grades and/or cognitive abilities of individual students. Others would point to the number of urban debate students using the activity as a ticket to college and consequently to a better chance at the good life. For some of us, however, both of these outcomes, while laudable, are necessary but not sufficient conditions upon which to base claims of achievement.

One of the most salient aspects of the social reality of many of our new urban debaters is that they are residents of toxic communities. These communities are not toxic in an ecological or chemical sense. Rather they are toxic in a social and environmental sense. These communities are by-products of the logic of economic development which seeks to configure urban space in a manner best suited to tap the profit potential of existing global economic forces regardless of the impact of such a configuration on community residents.

More than most communities, the toxic community is an artful teacher. It teaches subliminally but profoundly. The toxic community provides context for one's strivings. It defines the parameters of collective expectation. The toxic community is a place where basic social institutions such

as the family, schools, churches, and government are not expected to work. It transmits a culture within which behavior deemed aberrant by middle class American standards is nothing less than the logical response to one's desperate conditions. The toxic community inflicts emotional damage and leaves internal scars even upon those residents who maintain an outward appearance of normalcy.

The initial response of those residing in America's toxic communities is to seek to escape. Indeed, urban demographers point out that in recent years, minorities are leaving inner city communities and taking up residence in the suburbs more rapidly than are whites. But the toxic community remains. And for every toxic community resident who finds a "way out", that escaping resident is replaced by newer immigrants and a rapidly expanding impoverished youth population whose residential choices are limited to such toxic communities.

For many new urban debaters, the opportunities created by their mastery of policy debate represent a ticket out of the toxic community. Already, we have witnessed communities of privilege expanding to allow room for the rapidly ascending stars of urban debate and we are justly proud of this accomplishment.

But lest we delude ourselves, we need to be clear that this expansion of privilege (in American society as well as at all levels of policy debate) comes not because of the enlightened altruism of the traditional gatekeepers. Rather, this expansion occurs because the demographics of this country's growth dictate that it be so. Recent Census projections reveal that the minority community will account for nearly 90 percent of the total growth in the U. S. population between 1995 and 2050. During this same time period, the minority youth population will more than double while the white youth population will decline. In fact, by the year 2025, it is projected that the minority populations will outnumber the non-minority populations (white folk) in California, Texas, Hawaii, New Mexico and the District of Columbia. And in thirteen of the other most

populous states, the minority population in 2025 will constitute more than a third of the total state population.

Much of the dramatic minority population growth cited above will occur within America's toxic communities. In recognition of this fact, 40 million privileged Americans have already moved into walled enclaves that sub-division developers call "gated communities." For those of us fortunate enough to reside where true diversity lives, i.e. outside of the walls, we must shift our focus from the effort to facilitate the entry of selected minority individuals into the sterile sanctity found within the walls of privilege. We must rather struggle to transform the social realities that define the toxic environment outside of those walls.

We cannot abandon our toxic communities because those left behind, the ones who cannot get out, are people for whom we care deeply. They are our parents, our grandparents, our aunts<sup>iii</sup>, uncles and cousins, our friends and our neighbors. We must stay connected to these communities in order to deconstruct the social mythologies which masqueraded in our communities as articles of faith. We need to expose the myriad ways in which communities of privilege profit from the toxicity of our communities. In short, we need persons from toxic communities to stand and be advocates for persons unable to flee that toxic community.

Fortunately, from the perspective of George Washington's slaves, policy debate competition provides an excellent tool with which to prepare our students to become advocates for those who reside in our toxic communities. Policy debate teaches students to move past prima facie explanations and to search for explanations that more accurately reflect their social realities. Mastering the disadvantage argument structure requires students to become conscious of

unintended and unarticulated consequences of social policy. Policy debate teaches students how to research policy issues and how to evaluate the strength and veracity of evidence.

And just as important, policy debate competition teaches self-confidence. Students learn that work leads to success and that collaborative work leads to consistent success. Finally, policy debate competition teaches students that the rules of the game are often not neutral and, for that reason, the promulgated rules must always be examined and often challenged.

All of these attributes that policy debate can engender in its adherents are essential to the success of any who would advocate on behalf of the residents of our toxic communities. In order to take full advantage of the potential offered by policy debate, however, we need to reassess our thinking about what constitutes a successful policy debate program. We must seek broader participation among students in the activity. We must go beyond that strata of students who are likely to be consistent trophy winners and encourage those students to participate who might never win a trophy but who might have the courage to defend an embattled community. Policy debate competition has proven to be a powerful tool for students seeking to use higher education as an escape from our toxic communities. We must now make it work for students who will not go to college and for the communities in which they are destined to reside.

We must encourage students who have attained the aforementioned attributes from policy debate competition to utilize those skills on behalf of their communities. Our students should be sponsoring public debates in their communities on issues important to those communities. And where the dominant language in a community is not English, those public debates should

be held in the dominant language of the community. Students should publish community newsletters and journals to promote community-wide conversations. We must take advantage of public access television and community forums to generate critical dialogue about the factors contributing to the toxicity of our communities. Our students should appear at public hearings to debate the merits of proposed legislation or of public ordinances that impact on our community. They should form research collectives to examine the factual underpinning of proposed or existing public policies.

Our students should be encouraged to seek out and exploit every opportunity to take a stand in defense of the residents of their communities. If we cannot all move out of America's toxic communities, then we must make every effort to neutralize that toxicity.

<sup>i</sup> Brent Farrand "Urban Debate Leagues and the Role of Classroom Teachers in Guiding High School Debating", *The Rostrum*, Volume 75, Number 4, December 2000

<sup>ii</sup> Nicholas Lemann, "The Myth of Community Development." *The New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1994.

<sup>iii</sup> Minority Business Development Agency, "Minority Population Growth: 1995 - 2050" U. S. Department of Commerce, September, 1999

<sup>iv</sup> Everett McKenzie. *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential private Government*. (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1994

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