

As coaches, we focus most of our efforts and attention on preparing for tournaments. To our students, we hold out the potential glories of plaques, trophies and NFL degrees as incentives. We take pride in winning, and because of the nature of both our profession and of American society (sports/competition/materialism oriented as it is), we see little reason to think further about the possibilities for our speech programs that may exist just over the horizon.

I suggest that we in fact should look a little further, beyond the tournaments, contests, and competitions. Some of the most rewarding experiences for our talented students may exist outside of this conventional realm, yet within their own school and community. Why not consider offering your students opportunities to perform their best work for real audiences, in settings far more natural than the pressure cooker atmosphere of weekend tournaments?

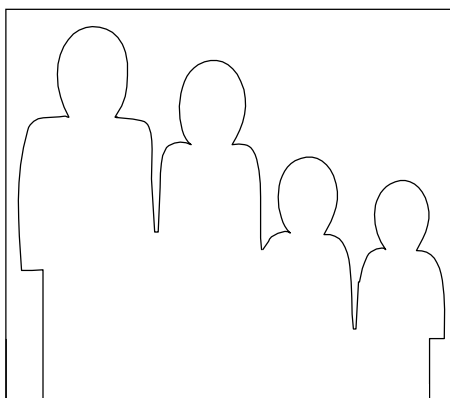
In addition, we as coaches ought to consider the big picture. Face it: winning prizes and championships is all very fine, and certainly your school gives at least lip service to such achievements, since they make the school look good, as do athletic championships and the awards won by musical and thespian groups in their competitions. But let us never forget that our primary mission is education, not winning.

"We should not neglect the non-competitive opportunities that are literally at our doorstep. We owe our communities that much"

Furthermore, one of the truly desirable trends in today's schools is an increased concern about literacy at all grade levels, and how to increase it. Having taught for thirty years, I applaud this trend. I cannot prove that illiteracy and aliteracy (a new term to describe students who can read, but don't) have increased over recent decades, but I do know that they are chronic problems, and as both coaches and educators, we have not only the opportunity but the capability to do something positive to promote literacy in our school communities.

Hence my proposal: let's get our forensics out of our own classrooms and practice rooms, and into the rooms of our colleagues in both our own school as well as neighboring schools, especially elementary schools.

Almost by accident, our team started



FORENSICS IN THE COMMUNITY

WHAT WE CAN
OFFER
by
Rusty McCrady

doing just that in 1997. In an after-practice conversation with a member of our team, I mentioned that my wife, a former high school drama teacher, used to have her students perform children's plays for the local elementary schools. My student wistfully expressed her desire to perform her children's literature piece for her first grade teacher, who was in fact still teaching that grade at Wyngate Elementary School, only two miles away. On the spot we agreed that she and three of her teammates would like to take a field trip to perform at her old school, and I got on the phone and started making the necessary arrangements. From that chance moment, a tradition was born. Over the past five years, we have made annual visits to Wyngate Elementary and two other elementary schools in our county. We keep going back because the whole arrangement is a win-win situation; my students get valuable experience, and the grade school students enjoy being entertained. In addition, book talks seem to arise spontaneously following my students' formal readings, with two fortuitous results. My students get ideas for new books to try out in future competitions, and the elementary kids enjoy shar-

ing titles of books they like to read. At Fairland Elementary School last January, my students presented *Tikki Tikki Tembo* and two other pieces in less than a half an hour, and then spent an hour discussing other book titles volunteered by the third graders, and answering questions about what it is like to be on a forensic and debate team at the high school level. The visit to that elementary school was one of the high points of the year for the high schoolers, the third graders, and their respective teachers.

Beyond these educational benefits are the intangibles. To quote Sarah Gowayed, an alumna of our forensics team (now a junior at the University of Maryland) when she was a senior here: "I love it when their faces light up as they gather around me almost like little puppies. It's as if they are caught by surprise when I use exotic voices in my pieces and they didn't expect it. I certainly enjoy performing in front of children much better than in front of judges at competitions because the reaction of the children and the expression of enjoyment on their faces is more rewarding than earning forensic points." Her friend Jessica Meyers (a junior at Goshen College, Indiana) said much the same thing after her final trip senior year to the fourth grade at Clearspring Elementary School.

"I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to take forensics outside the classroom."

"I never expected to get such joy out of reading to little kids, but there is something about the way their eyes look up at you when you're reading."

Veteran Clearspring teacher Virginia Hillegas spoke of how her fourth graders have benefited from the visits by the high school students. "The Walter Johnson [High School] Forensic students have visited my fourth grade class for five years. My students learn firsthand how you can make a character in a story come alive just by changing your voice and attitude. The students make the characters real." She went on to note, "Any time high school students interact with young students, it becomes a real life lesson."

Finally, the forensic coach need not go far afield to discover places where students will be welcome to perform. In my school, these opportunities have been in the English classrooms of my colleagues. For example, English teacher Terri Crain (continued to page 30)

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teaches units in humor, linguistics, argument, and satire in her "regular" and AP 11th and 12th (language and literature) classes. Over the past few years we have arranged to have students from the forensic team present persuasive oratory speeches, and individual humor pieces as well as group (readers' theater and duo) pieces in her classes. "The persuasive presentation was good for my 11th graders because they saw how important organization and the use of substantiation are in presenting an argument. There was a clear link to the 'inquiry' unit and the writing of the research paper in the English curriculum. Students are always impressed when they see their peers actually using the skills learned in English class." Terri went on to say that the students were both impressed as well as entertained by the humor presentations. "It was another way for them to see how satire is done by students who were well prepared. It was almost like seeing professionals."

On the other side of the coin, several years ago I was pleased to be able to invite a fellow coach, Bill Lemonovich of Einstein High School, and his county champion in poetry interpretation to my own English class. I did so because my students were not always the most enthusiastic fans of the written word. After seeing Roxanne (the poetry champion) perform, they were a good deal more enthusiastic about the study of poetry.

One of our goals for next year will be to visit other English classrooms, in addition to Ms. Crain's. Further afield, we are considering the idea of visiting a local assisted living (senior care) facility to do some readings of traditional poetry. Such visits will probably be more difficult to arrange than trips to area schools, but they are potentially just as rewarding, if not more so.

Winning a tournament, or even a round, will always be an unmatched thrill for our young forensic enthusiasts. There's no doubt that competition will always have its place. However, we should not neglect the non-competitive opportunities that are literally at our doorstep. We owe our communities that much.

(Rusty McCrady is forensic and debate coach at Walter Johnson (MD) High School and President of the Montgomery County Debate League.)