

CHAIN REACTION

by Jim Fleissner

I know I date myself by keeping my notes on these little index cards. It has been 20 years since I was a high school debate student and 10 since I was a coach. As a person who literally grew up in this activity, but who now has the perspective that a little distance brings, I am here today to pay tribute to you, the coaches--especially those of you who have spent your careers in coaching and devoted your lives to this activity.

It is an honor to be once again in your midst. As my wife, Eileen, and I made the trip from Macon this morning to be with you, I had a feeling about bringing her here. I realized that it was the very same kind of feeling I had when I brought her to meet my family and to see the place where I was raised.

You coaches have a remarkable impact as teachers. You have a profound effect on the intellectual growth of your students and, because of the great amount of time you invest in your students, you have an effect other teachers seldom can: You are role models and counsellors and friends.

Your powerful influence as teachers extends beyond the students currently in your program. Coaches are often relied upon by students after graduation. That's a sign of how you are mentors who guide students in their continuing education, their careers, and their lives.

As I see it, coaches set in motion a chain reaction of good effects. When you teach skills and substance and serve as role models, your effect on students starts a chain reaction that extends through the students' lives and to the lives of the persons they encounter. It is difficult to imagine the sum total of the chain reaction caused by a devoted career coach. And thinking about the sum total of the chain reactions caused by all the people in this room simply boggles the mind.

Part of your effect is the result of the skills you teach--communication skills, argument skills, and research skills. And part of it is the result of attitudes you encourage in your students--attitudes about hard work and determination, about thorough preparation, about learning from mistakes, about competing fairly, about losing and winning with grace. You even

encourage intellectual curiosity, itself.

For me, the skills and attitudes I learned in debate have meant everything. I recall a moment in the fall of 1971 like it was yesterday. I remember going to school as a ninth grader one day that fall and going to the glass trophy cases of the Marquette High School forensic team. I was looking to see if my name was on a list posted there, a list of those selected by the coach, Jim Copeland, to be on the team. Seeing my name on that list was the critical moment in my education.

The lessons I learned from my coach served me well when I became a coach, and later as a law student and as a prosecutor in the trial court and the court of appeals. As a prosecutor, those lessons were also invaluable to me when trying to solve difficult problems and make hard decisions. Mr. Copeland used to have a saying: "Evidence is where you find it."

You are members of.... "The Academy of Debate"

Now there is a generation of federal prosecutors in Chicago, a group I was fortunate to help train, who are familiar with that concept. And let me also add that the lessons from debate also were with me when I first stood, somewhat petrified, in front of a law school class last fall.

Don't mistake me. I'm not just saying those lessons helped me in my pursuits and in achieving any success I've had. I'm saying they made those pursuits possible.

Beyond the skills and attitudes, let me mention an often neglected facet of your teaching: the substantial body of knowledge acquired by your students. Debate students study about complex issues of public policy. In the fall of 1971, we were debating a topic concerning the jury system. I bet there were not many ninth graders who, when asked by their parents what they wanted for Christmas, gave the answer I did. I wanted a copy of *The American Jury*, the famous book by Professors Harry Kalven and Hans Zeisel. If ideas are the currency of our political system, your students leave high school with hefty savings accounts.

How many times have you heard a news report about some startling new development, only to realize that you heard about it years ago in debate? For example, the first time I encountered the notion that there were forces that might cause the collapse of the Soviet Union resulting in dangerous regional instability was in a high school debate over a decade ago. Silly academic dream-world arguments? I say if you want a glimpse at the issues of 2005, listen to a high school debate today.

Of course, exposure to the complexity of issues and the value of research imparts another critical lesson to students. In an age when politics seems driven by polling data based on quick and easy responses to general propositions, it is your students who are most likely to respond by saying "What are the specifics of the plan?" or "I'd have to do some research to give you an intelligent answer."

Finally, I want to remark about an even more neglected fact about your work, and that is the achievement of the learning *you* do. Being a coach is to be enrolled in a continuing graduate course in public policy.

You are members of what might be called "The Academy of Debate." The knowledge acquired over the years by career coaches is formidable. As a person who graduated from "The Academy of Debate", I envy the breadth and depth of your continuing education. This group is a great resource with tremendous potential to do good.

And so I congratulate you on your careers in coaching. I know it is consuming, hard work. But when you are next pacing a dank, dark school corridor late on a weekend evening, waiting for the last round to end and the long drive home, please be mindful of the chain reaction of good effects you continually set off, and remember that it touches people--at that very moment and for generations.

(A former coach at Kinkaid School (TX), Jim Fleissner was a debate semifinalist at the 1973 National Tournament and was the 1971 NCFL debate champion. He is now a Professor of Law at the Walter George School of Law, Mercer University (GA.). This speech was delivered at the Barkley Forum coaches luncheon in 1995.)