Baltimore's Urban Debaters Prove the Word is Mightier than the Sword





by Kathleen Cushman | 2005

Baltimore, MD — At 8 a.m. on a cold Saturday morning, most of Chris and Dayvon's friends are at home asleep. But these seniors from Baltimore's struggling Forest Park High School have set up shop in the cafeteria of a rival high school and are hunched over stacks of newspapers and outlines of arguments. They are meticulously planning their strategy for the day's debate.

Chris and Dayton are two of the top debaters in the Baltimore Urban Debate League (BUDL), which gathers 200 students from 27 inner-city high schools to participate in the fine, time-test sport of competitive argument.

In their baggy jeans and oversized t-shirts, these two ambitious teens challenge the "debate team" image of elite students dresses as young lawyers. They have no privately paid couches, laptops, or large travel budgets. The schools they attend find providing students with textbooks and Internet access a challenge in itself.

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But their arguments are no less compelling than those of wealthier peers—and these students bring an entirely new perspective to the podiums of high school debate.

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"Living in an urban community fosters a different outlook on the whole world," Dayvon says. "If you come from a certain location, a certain socioeconomic background, you're going to think about things a particular way. Different things affect you than someone in a more privileged community."

It is students like Chris and Dayvon that the Open Society Institute had in mind when it created the National Urban Debate League, funding local Leagues in fifteen cities across the country. Launched seven years ago, the project has changed the landscape of high school debating—and the lives of many American students.

New knowledge



Competitive debaters across the nation grapple with one major topic, or resolution, per year. This year's topic is how the federal government can better assist United Nations peacekeepers around the world. Baltimore's urban debaters muster arguments with impeccable *logos*, or logic, yet they also have life experience to draw on that can infuse their positions with *pathos*, or deeply held feelings that can sway judges in a tie.

When the debate begins at Carver High School early on Saturday morning, Chris and Dayvon take their seats with quiet confidence. Their opponents Nicholas and Imam enter, weighed down by bulging file folders full of evidence, and followed by the neutral adult judge.

After a curt greeting, the round gets underway. 15-year-old Nicolas approaches the front of the classroom to make his first speech. "The United States federal government should establish a foreign policy substantially increasing its support of United Nations peacekeeping operations, so as to combat the proliferation of sex-trafficking in Africa," he states seamlessly. The teams are off to the races.

Chris stands up after Nicolas' speech for a brief cross-examination. His composure is stoic. "So you're telling me that we're going to alleviate nuclear war by training UN peacekeepers to control sex-trafficking? Where's the causation?"

Grabbing for evidence to bolster his argument, Nicolas responds, "If you look at the article I quoted from yesterday's *Washington Post*, you'd see the link."

It's not all adversarial language, however. In an impassioned speech opposing the arming of UN peacekeepers with guns, Nicolas argues, "I see two or three guns *a day*—around the neighborhood, with kids, adults, anyone. You think we're any safer around my block because these people are armed?"

He has a point.

Nicholas could, however, argue the opposite point tomorrow. Like debaters everywhere, BUDL students argue both sides of the issue. Sharp, concise evidence is a necessity, and intellectual

creativity becomes these students' modus operandi. Nicolas relates: "You've got to think outside the box to use the evidence you've got, to answer an argument you weren't anticipating."›



Demonstrating their knowledge and versatility in front of an impartial judge is one of the most empowering parts of the process. When it results in victory, the taste is sweet. When the result is defeat, the students go back to the drawing board. Either way, Chris explains, "This is the only forum where I can speak, express my ideas in front of my peers, and an adult *has* to listen."

Sharp edges, deep rewards

Alongside the pleasures of competition and recognition are some sharp social edges that Baltimore's urban debaters must learn to navigate. Success in an intellectual sport can create a social catch-22 for urban youth: "I can't use the big words I learn in debate around my friends," Nicolas says. "They don't know what I'm talking about, and even teachers sometimes look at me funny."

This is one of the issues that BUDL's adult mentors work to address. Executive Director Pam Spiliadis explains, "If we can give these kids the skills they need to compete with each other and other schools in the area, then debate will lose its 'dorky' stigma and become the cool thing to do."

A large handful of the students who debate start out with remedial reading skills—and on average, only 54 percent of Baltimore city students graduate from high school. Yet last year, every single BUDL senior earned a diploma, and eight out of ten went on to attend college—almost double Baltimore's average.



Urban Debate League students take away payoffs that go well beyond the trophies they collect: articulate dissent, self-esteem, confidence, an awareness of global issues. Yet perhaps the most important payoff is a group of academically motivated peers to connect to throughout high school.

This sense of community is vital when inner-city teams meet competitors from the wealthier suburban districts surrounding Baltimore. There, the BUDL students may find assumptions to deal with that could injure or strengthen them. Chris, Dayvon, and Stephanie choose to be strengthened, to transform stereotypes—and to keep their eyes on the prize.

Chris relates, "At one tournament Dayvon and I saw racial slurs written on bathroom walls before we went into a round. We got upset, but it made us more excited to debate. Whatever preconceived notions they have about us as people or debaters—because of the color of our skin, or the school we come from—as soon as we open our mouths they know that they have to debate their best or else they'll go home losers."

"It makes us work that much harder," Dayvon agrees. "We don't make excuses; we just push ourselves to be competitive with the other teams."

"Debate breaks down the stereotype that urban youth are bad kids—always out there shooting people, robbing people, skipping school, getting pregnant," Stephanie says. "It shows that we're not all out there being the menaces to society that they say we are-we're improving ourselves, we're learning, we're changing things. We debate issues that most people don't get exposed to, even in college."

"And hey," says Dayvon, grinning. "Nothing's wrong with showing off some big trophies back at your school."