Aurora debaters come home world champions



By Brock Weir

Natalie Ganzhorn and Olivia Railton had been down this road before.

Friends for most of their lives, the Aurora students have grown up together, gone to school together, and debated together.

They have also sat side by side waiting for their names to be called after plenty of high profile student debating championships, and both have come away with some pretty significant hardware, but there was something different in the air last month at the World Debating Championships in Pittsburgh.

?When they announced the finalists, Natalie and I were the only two people who made every single category in the final,? says Olivia. ?We were like, ?Oh, God!' We knew we had come in the Top 10, but we could have been ninth or tenth. We just sat there counting down the Top 10 and as soon as they said our friend Naz was in third place, Nat and I just looked at each other, grabbed each other because that had to have meant we were the top two. We were just hugging and crying and it was crazy.?

Olivia's name was called next ? second was secured ? and coming in as World Champ, of course, was Natalie, a fitting end for this Grade 12 student's high school debating career.

?It feels amazing,? says Natalie. ?It was especially exciting to receive these results on my fourth time at the competition. Every year I have been able to learn from the other competitors and make such amazing friends. It's such an exciting way for me to end my debating and public speaking career!?

Olivia, a Grade 11 student, agrees. Both students are co-heads of Country Day School's debating team, but once Natalie's gone to the University of Western Ontario to study political science and international relations, Olivia will be at the helm.

?I was just so happy and excited,? says Olivia. ?With Nat, there is no other way I would have wanted that to turn out. I wanted her to win so badly. It was her last year and she deserved to win. She won and it was amazing.?

Until the worlds tangled with the combined forces of Natalie and Olivia, the best CDS ever came in the Worlds was eighth place overall. This dynamic duo, however, have set the bar high, taking the top two spots. Last year, for instance, Olivia came in 23rd

place overall with a first place finish in the debating category. This time around, she was determined to set a personal best.

?I was stressed,? she says. ?I was really prepping, prepping, prepping for this one. We just worked so hard this time.?

Describing herself as a ?fly by the seat of my pants? kind of person, Olivia says she flourishes in debating while finding the persuasive speaking element of the championships a bit more of a challenge. But, she rose to it ? thanks to late nights staying up to 2.45 a.m., being drilled through her speeches by international friends and coffee.

Lots and lots of coffee.

?My friend from Australia and I have this joke that right before Persuasive, during lunch you just see all these kids walking around and talking to themselves, all these crazy people,? says Olivia. ?Are they crazy people, or debaters? Everyone is walking around, panicking, in this trance state of memorizing. Troy, one of my South African friends, stayed up with me until about 2 a.m. He had already memorized his speech and was confident in it. He took it from me and made me do it for him. Every time I would mess up, he made me go back to the beginning. I owe a fair amount of Persuasive to him.?

With Natalie off to university this year, Olivia has one more year to go before she pursues her post-secondary dreams in either the United Kingdom or the United States. In the meantime, she has her eyes firmly set on the next challenge. If she goes the distance again, the road will take her to nationals in Winnipeg next year, followed by worlds in Sydney, Australia.

?I always knew I wanted to keep doing this next year,? she says. ?There was briefly some doubt, but it was less that I didn't like it, but more that I couldn't handle it anymore. I love public speaking, but sometimes when you're missing weeks of school, classes, and social events, it gets you thinking, ?Oh, God!' I get behind in school and then I get stressed and wonder if it is worth it. But, there is something about experiences like worlds that make it worth it, and just the friends I have made and the feeling of getting up on the podium and debating a ridiculous amount of people!
?That all makes it worth it.?