

Aurora High School debate team challenges Richmond Hill and Newmarket on home turf

By Jeff Doner

Throughout the year, the Aurora High School (AHS) debate team has spent countless hours preparing and practicing their craft every Thursday night after school.

After all their hard work, the team's skills will be on display next Wednesday when they host their own debate tournament at AHS. The tournament will pit them against some of the Region's best from Richmond Hill High School and Newmarket High School.

"The team members are very excited for this debate," said AHS debate team president Chen Liu. "We had a debate at Pickering College in December. I think that's the one that got our wheels going, but I think this one is a test for the debaters, and for me as well to see how well we organized it. It's great to see their skills implemented in a real competition."

The group is made up of 15 students, mostly in Grade 10, who have been learning various styles of debate, from formal parliamentary debate to the less rigid.

Liu said this year's debate team is focused and has grown together throughout a long school year.

"I think you can see people go into the debate team from all kinds of backgrounds and we all have a common goal of being able to share our ideas, express our opinions and, at the end of it, we can really see the level of confidence grow," he said. "We have all certainly come a long way from September."

Martin Nicolai, the debate team facilitator, and a history teacher at AHS, said Liu and the team have done a great job of staying dedicated throughout the whole year.

"I am the one who kind of organizes the students and suggests things we should do, but [Liu] has taken over that role almost completely and he's very enthusiastic, very responsible and very energetic," he said. "He does exercises for training the students and gets everyone involved and he's also the one who really organized this tournament."

Nicolai has been involved with the debate team for over 10 years and said the students take a number of important skills out of it.

"I think that public speaking is a skill that is applicable to just about every job you can imagine," he explained. "It's about organizing your thoughts and collecting information and very quickly developing a persuasive argument on your behalf. It also requires the skill of seeing the other person's point of view."

But one of the biggest things he sees from students who get involved with the debate team is confidence.

"Some of these kids come in and they're not really sure about whether they can do this and how good they'll be, but with practice, they've really become quite effective speakers and I think that's something really positive as well."

Liu said he remembers the first time he participated in a debate, recalling it as a "scary experience," but he said the support from his teammates and reminding others that everyone starts out in the same place helps.

"In any career, it's important to have the communication skills to back up a point that you want to make," he said. "I hope next year we will have a debate tournament for the YRDSB. That is a long term goal that I can see."