

International debater ready to take on the world -- again



By Brock Weir

Some people might have reached their saturation point with the ongoing race to be the next president of the United States, but Aurora's Olivia Railton is not one of those people.

A world-class debater with international titles under her belt, Olivia, a student at Country Day School, is spending this month preparing to take on the best of the best from across the country in Winnipeg this February at the Canadian National Championships.

When she takes the stage in Manitoba, Olivia will have to flex her muscles in writing and presenting a persuasive speech, impromptu speaking, presenting a reading, and debating on a topic that is yet to be determined.

"I would love to debate the American election and who should most definitely not be president," she says, without naming names. "I am currently doing a project in my world issues class right now about 'green washing' and 'white washing', how corporations are doing things to cover up their criminal activity. It would be interesting if one of those topics came up about corporations being held responsible for their actions with regards to human rights and environmental violations in ways other than just fines."

But, if Olivia finds herself assigned to debate why Donald Trump "to pick a presidential candidate at random (or not)" is the best thing to happen to the United States, she is prepared for that.

"One thing debating has taught me is how to argue against your own beliefs, which I actually think is a decent life skill: how to swallow your pride, accept you have an opinion, and that is what it is. You can't say your opinion is right on something like politics. Everyone has their own belief system and ideals. Someone might very much agree with Donald Trump's policies, and there are ways in which I can see why someone would agree, even if I wouldn't, necessarily, but if I had to argue why he would be a great candidate, I could."

Topics Olivia can confirm she is tackling in other areas are no less heady. For her persuasive speech, she is preparing arguments on the problems with juvenile incarceration in both Canada and the United States, an issue she says raises a "multitude of concerns."

"In 22 states, children are able to be prosecuted as adults," she says. "If you are 10-years-old and you commit a crime, you could possibly be serving life in prison. It doesn't make any sense, especially when you have children in situations that are hostile like prisons. You are kind of breeding them in a way at such a developmental stage of their lives to be scared of things and to hate authority."

'Offenders who get put in prison before the age of 18, have an 80 per cent higher chance of reoffending because they just grow to hate police officers and hate authority, and hate adults, and it is this awful situation. You need to focus on making kids better, not sticking them in jail.'

For her reading, Olivia has chosen a selection from *The Day the Voices Stopped* about a man who, after 30 years, no longer suffers from schizophrenia, but debating, she says, is her true passion.

Olivia, now in Grade 11, first went to Debate Camp in the summer following Grade 8. One of the instructors at the camp told her it takes two years to get really good at it, and Olivia says she took this as a challenge. By Grade 10, she began taking home trophies.

'When I was younger and I was going to debate a lot of older kids in content and policy-based debates, it was really intimidating because I hadn't learned anything yet,' she says. 'When I was in Grade 8 and we were talking about the heads of corporations and international law, I was like, 'What is this?'

'The first debate I did was at this camp and it was a philosophical and moral debate with the resolution: this house has found concrete evidence that God doesn't exist.' The house would destroy the evidence and the opposition argues it would share it with the world. I was government and I had to argue why that would cause so many problems. It was interesting because it was so hypothetical. You were thinking about fallout as opposed to the specifics and facts. It was the first time I was confident in my speaking and it made me realise I could actually debate and it gave me confidence in other debates. [Since then] there have been competitions where I haven't necessarily placed or didn't do as well as I thought I should have done, but [debating competitions are] really about personal improvement. A good thing to compare it to is athletics like track or cross country. You can be an Olympic cross country runner and never come in the Top 3, but you're better than the majority of the world, you know you did your best, and I think if you know you worked hard, practiced, and gave it everything you could, then I would be happy.'