

Aurora teens take on the world in Hong Kong ? and bring home a win



By Brock Weir

Stepping out onto the international stage last month, Aurora student Olivia Railton knew that she had put in her best effort to prepare for this moment.

She and her debate team at Country Day School live by the motto 'practice makes perfect' and indeed they put almost everything aside to get everything just right ahead of their journey to Hong Kong to take part in the International Independent Schools' Public Speaking Competition.

She was confident in her material, an 11-minute presentation intended to persuade audiences on the pitfalls of drone warfare and, in particular, against the United States' Signature Strike Program.

Others may have broken a sweat at the realization one of their judges was a woman from an opposing American team, but Olivia was there to persuade and persuade she did.

'Previous to my speech she was very cordial but afterwards told me I had persuaded her to be against them,' she says.

A big task? Maybe, but she and her fellow students were more than up to the challenge, securing first place overall over 35 teams from eight different countries. Teammate Natalie Ganzhorn, also from Aurora, finished first place overall out of 121 participants, also securing herself first place and second place finishes in persuasive speaking and dramatic interpretation, respectively.

Olivia finished in fifth place overall, also bringing home the St. Margaret's Trophy as top speaker under the age of 16.

Student Magellan Jull finished third in dramatic interpretation, while Shanee Moran was a finalist in interpretive reading.

'I was very much against it,' says Olivia of the drone program, noting she had three main arguments on why they were a bad idea. 'It basically allows for the targeting of anybody that fits a terrorist criteria that they have. It is honestly just being an Arab man over 5'5" and in an area where terrorists are known to operate, which is terribly racist and unfair.

'My first argument was strikes were creating more terrorists in the sense that they are angering civilians because a lot of innocent people are dying. It just makes people want to retaliate against America because they see America as this enemy that is killing all these innocent civilians. The second is it is detaching these American soldiers at home in that they are sitting in these comfortable chairs at government facilities in the United States and they are basically playing video games. People on the other side of that

screen lost their lives and it is dehumanizing in the sense it is becoming so easy to take the lives of other human beings without remorse and without significant psychological damages.?

The third, she says, it is simply against international humanitarian law.

In addition to her persuasive argument, Olivia also participated in impromptu speaking and dramatic interpretation, which included the memorization of a monologue. The competition was difficult, she says, but really fun; and being able to take in everything in Hong Kong was an added bonus.

It is a bonus that she is set to repeat this spring as her win last month secured her a place in the worlds, which will take place on the island this April as part of a 10 day competition bringing together over 200 students from across the globe.

Accompanying the team on this past competition ? and set to do so once again next spring ? is long-time coach Kerstin Wyndham West. Over the years, Ms. Wyndham West has developed a winning formula with her students, trying to tailor the various categories that can come up in competitions like these with their own particular interests. Recognizing Olivia's passion for current affairs and world issues, they eagerly went down this path, but other students on the team can, for instance, have a flair for drama.

?I try to match the students own interests with the events and then we sit down and brainstorm ideas,? she says. ?We often come in on weekends and stay late into the evening and practice, practice, practice. It takes a lot of time?.but they make me very proud.?

?Every time you do it you get better and every time I do it I like it more and more,? adds Olivia. ?When I am older I would really like to pursue a career in international relations and international policy or law. I find debate the absolute best preparation I could ever have for that. The really nice thing about debate and public speaking is even if you don't decide to go directly [into a field] associated with public speaking, you really need it in any career you can possibly have and will always be useful.

?This whole experience was amazing. It was so incredible and so different than here. I am really happy I am part of debating because of the opportunities that arise out of it.?