

Grade 10 student crowned world champion debater



By Brock Weir

Some might think it takes guts for a country to send female diplomats to countries that have poor records when it comes to women's rights, even if it is just to make a point.

Olivia Railton is not one of those people and it was up to this Grade 10 Aurora student to convince the world, taking the stage in the grand finals of the World Debating Championship in Hong Kong.

The only Grade 10 student to crack the grand finals in a sea of Grade 12 students from around the globe who will be packing up for Harvard, Stamford and Cambridge this summer, she was shocked at her success, but kept her eyes on the prize.

'Before I went up to speak, I told my partner Philip [who is going to Harvard] that I was nervous,' says Olivia. 'He just said to breathe. Here's what's going to happen. Either you're going to come first and I'm going to come second, or I'm going to come first and you're going to come in second, but we can't let them win.'

And they didn't. Olivia, a student at Country Day School, returned last week, crowned the World Champion.

The four students to make the Grand Finals were split into two groups of two, with the order of things decided by a coin toss. Whoever won the toss got to choose the topic, with the loser getting to pick which side of the argument they wanted to represent. The advantage was in losing, said Olivia, and when they lost the toss, choosing the side was a no-brainer.

'At first glance, it appears if you have a more feminist mindset the proposition would be the way to go, but upon looking at it more in depth, it actually,' says Olivia, concluding the sentence with a dismissive gesture. 'Our main idea was if you send only female diplomats to these countries it could actually undermine feminism as a whole. [The opposition]'s whole case was it would give the girls in these countries a role model to show women can be powerful too. Firstly, women would only be in these positions because they have to be women. They are not actually being powerful. The whole point of feminism is that the girls and boys in these countries can rise up and say women are equal and they shouldn't need any Western saviour to come over and show that to them.

'It also undermines diplomacy because you want feminism to be recognized as a legitimate ideal in the country. Also, the lives of these women could also be put at great risk because if you see everything that is happening in the news right now with ISIS and all

the atrocious things that are happening, they really like the shock factor and would probably like nothing more than to kidnap a female diplomat and potentially harm her because that would show women can't do this job and this is what happens if you send a woman there.?

Case closed.

As Olivia made her case, she was watched proudly by debate coach Kerstin Wyndham-West.

?Partway through Liv's speech, obviously the audience felt her arguments were very strong and the audience started to clap and cheer and she actually had to stop and chuckle,? says Ms. Wyndham-West. ?It is unusual for an audience to get so into a debate they're showing which side they agree with. It was a wonderful experience and a very proud moment for her mum, who was watching, and for me, as a coach, to see.?

By the time her students get to the finals and grand finals, they are usually prepared, they know what to do, and Ms. Wyndham-West tells them to have fun. If they have to make a persuasive speech, as fellow-Aurora student Natalie Ganzhorn did, coming in third place in the Grand Finals for Persuasive Speaking, they might go through it once or twice before she calls time and they can relax and have fun.

?I have been doing this for a really long time and I would say whenever students have done really well, and this is obviously above and beyond anything the majority of students have ever been able to achieve from our school, it is a matter of pride and excitement and high emotion. The kids laugh at me, but I am a pretty emotional person, so I got a little teary.?

For Olivia, however, the win took a bit of time to digest. It was a ?nerve wracking? experience, but after grabbing the trophy, and giving it a kiss almost in disbelief, the reality set in.

?Afterwards, we were all freaking out because Team Canada as a whole did really well,? says Olivia. ?When people know nothing about debating, they typically think we're a bunch of non-fun people, just bookworms, but I like to think we're all really extroverted and fun. We argue for fun!?

As a Grade 10 student, Olivia has plenty of time to plan her future, but she has her sights set on defending her crown next year, before studying at Oxford or the University of London for politics, philosophy and economics.

?If I could be the person that goes from Canada to Switzerland to sign the pieces of paper that fix everything, I would be happy,? she says.