

Students sharpen debating skills while hosting invitational



By Brock Weir

Russian meddling, Donald Trump, trade wars, and Mark Zuckerberg in the hot seat, there has been no shortage of hot headlines in 2018, but while some people might claim they have current affairs fatigue, each headline is something fresh for local debaters to sink their teeth into.

There were plenty of topics to chew on this month as Pickering College's debate team, The Polikon Society, hosted an invitational debate tournament, inviting their colleagues from Villanova College (King), Newmarket High School, Appleby College, and University of Toronto Schools for a friendly Pro-Am, which featured impromptu and prepared rounds.

‘We invited a lot of the schools we see at other debate tournaments and reached out to almost all the schools that have debate teams and we have a pretty good turnout,’ says student co-organizer Sophia Townsend, Grade 10.

Speaking to The Auroran ahead of the tourney, alongside fellow Grade 10 student Ava Khansari and Grade 11 student Patrick LeClaire, Sophia said in preparing the event they inevitably looked at topics that have recently been in the news and that nothing should come as a surprise to the participating the debaters.

One topic, said Patrick, was whether world religion should become a mandatory course in schools.

‘There are controversial topics that are meant to have either side being able to win, and that is the main point,’ said Patrick. ‘Some of them could be with the President and NAFTA agreements, trade with China, trade with Canada, it could be Mark Zuckerberg and his trials, and the security of social media’ which is probably going to be one of the resolutions.’

As Pickering College hosted the tourney, they were limited in the numbers of their own students they could put forward. As such, many Polikon Society members were left to the organization, but that did nothing to diminish their passion.

‘Certain topics that are controversial in the news where a lot of different opinions have been put out on them are the kinds of topics we like to debate because there are so many different views you can bring to the table that would give you an advantage in a debate,’ said Ava, adding this approach serves her well away from the formal debating table too. ‘I often find myself, when I am arguing with my parents over something, using my debating skills in order to bring solid arguments so that I can win an argument.’

Sophia agreed: ‘I use my debating skills when I am talking to people, but also thinking about stuff because the debates we do are prepared. You learn a lot about new topics that I never would have been interested in or really thought about, and that makes me feel more comfortable when I am talking to people about those topics and things going on.’

Debate, added Patrick, teaches him how to think of problems from many different angles.

‘I think debating is a life skill that helps you communicate and get your point across very well and be comfortable speaking in front of people,’ he said, noting one of their aims in planning the tourney was to help younger students feel more comfortable speaking and standing up in front of crowds. ‘I am interested in [studying] law, and debating is an essential skill to have if I want to get into that.’

Sophia said she has her eye on a similar goal.

?I never thought of law as a career path for me, but then when I started debating I thought it was super-interesting and a really great way to get your point across,? she said. ?That has opened my eyes to law as a career, but I am not sure where it will take me.? Ava, on the other hand, is currently planning to be a dentist, and although a dental chair is not normally the place for a good, heated argument, there are other ways she plans on using her debating skills to propel her towards the ultimate goal.

?I think debating will really help me improve my social skills and my communication skills in order to communicate with as many people as possible,? she explained. ?In university, debating will help me a lot with writing and communicating and I can debate in university to get more experience.?

The Polikon Society is a full member of The Fulford League, a debate league open to all independent schools in Ontario.