

Tough issues to be tackled head-on as Aurora debaters take on world



By Brock Weir

If you want a barometer of the world issues that are going to dominate the national and international conversation over the next year or so, consult with a local debating student.

As two Aurora students head this week to the World Debating Championships in Pittsburgh, they are among the 12 best debating students from across Canada set to take on their international peers, numbering between 80 and 100, on the issues that matter to them.

And, according to Country Day School debating teacher Kerstin Wyndham-West, these issues are often a precursor to a larger conversation.

"What's really fascinating to me is we tend to pick cutting edge topics and then, a year or two later, many of the solutions [the students] propose are actually put into play and we see them discussed in the national or world forum," says Ms. Wyndham-West, who is accompanying Aurora students Natalie Ganzhorn and Olivia Railton to the international competition. "It gives a sense of hope for the future in the way these guys are tackling issues that are so important and hopefully make a difference."

These students do not shy away from tackling these problems head-on.

A key component of the Worlds is a persuasive speech in which students are tasked to come up with a topic, take a position, and bring judges around to their way of thinking. Natalie is taking on the topic of female genital mutilation not just in the developing world, but all around the globe.

"The speech is geared very much towards, yes, it is an uncomfortable topic, but because we don't talk about it, it continues to be a real problem," says Ms. Wyndham-West. "It is still happening here as well as in other places around the world and [this will be about] what we can do to solve the problem."

Olivia, on the other hand, is tackling the vast and growing world of cyber-terrorism.

Olivia recently returned from the Nationals in Winnipeg, where she won the National Public Speaking and Debating Championship. There, she won with her persuasive speech on juvenile incarceration in Canada and the United States, arguing 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, hate authority, and hate adults an awful situation. We need to focus on making kids better, not sticking them in jail.

While in Winnipeg, Olivia and many of the other competitors, had a chance to go through the Human Rights Museum, which was a particularly moving experience for those taking aim at issues related to just that.

There is quite an emphasis on native culture and community because there are quite a few Aboriginal groups native to around that area, says Olivia. [Aboriginal rights] is a huge issue in Canada with the fact we have a million people who don't have access to clean water and we think we're a first world country. We have a ridiculous native suicide rate and a ridiculous native rate of mental illness, alcoholism and drug abuse just because people aren't giving them the support they need.

Following the visit to the Human Rights museum, Olivia was challenged with arguing against the resolution governments should not take into account the opinions of local residents when building nationally beneficial works.

If I am wanting to build some huge infrastructure like the Keystone XL Pipeline through sacred native land, I shouldn't listen to what the Natives are saying? Obviously we should listen to the people. [Aboriginal rights] is one of the most pressing issues in Canada. We pride ourselves on being this amazing, inclusive nation, but we have so many people who are struggling and I think we definitely need to do more to help these people.

As the students prepared their talking points last week, they also looked forward to reconnecting with some familiar faces from around the world who are regulars on the debating circuit as well. As Natalie prepares to head off to her post-secondary career after this term, Olivia said she was looking forward to taking on the world with her long-time friend and co-president of the CDS debate team one last time.

Ms. Wyndam-West was also looking on with pride.

It makes us incredibly proud, she says. I have been doing this for a really long time and I have been lucky enough that I think in the last nine years we have had at least one student qualify for the Worlds. When you only have one coming from all of Canada is pretty cool, and they have all gone on to do some really cool things and the majority of them are advocates in some way for those who are less fortunate.

