



**INTERVIEWS**

## Libraries and Debate : A Match Made in Heaven

by Marianna Vertsman, Mid-Manhattan Library

April 4, 2017

[Preview this post in our new blog design](#)



On a frigid winter morning I sat down with a dedicated team of debate advocates to discuss the work of [New York City Urban Debate League](#). [Erik Fogel](#), the [League's](#) current President, is passionate about providing access to debate for all students. [Aubrey Semple](#), the [League's](#) Program Director, discussed the relationship between debate and democracy. [Aubrey](#) emphasized the importance of Library's [resources](#) and the necessity of learning the basics of the research process. The Program Manager, [Courtney Kaufman](#), explained how hearing certain arguments during debates can present a student with a brand new perspective on an issue.

## How did New York City Debate League originated and what makes it different ?

**Erik:** [New York City Urban Debate League](#) provides free debate opportunities and targeting outreach to schools that can't afford membership in a private debate league. In 2011 only a handful of New York City's schools had access to competitive debate. As a debate league prior to us ended its existence in 2011, school teachers got together and started [New York City Urban Debate League](#). Originally financed by bake sales, we have been growing and are currently serving three thousand students per year. Tournaments are held almost every single weekend, with over a hundred schools in participation. Those events have hundreds of students, coaches and families in attendance.

**Aubrey:** The way the debating landscape works in New York City, it's inevitable that students will interact with



debate teams from various other debate leagues. For example, on the national level there is something that is called the National Forensics League, also now known as the [National Speech and Debate Association](#). It is the highest and largest debate body in the world. When you go to the tournament, you will utilize different debate formats and you will have schools debate each other in other leagues, with other students. As part of the [New York City Urban Debate League](#), we go to tournament with [National Catholic Forensic League](#), [National Speech and Debate Association](#) and [National Debate Coaches Association](#). Since everyone is debating under the same leagues, what makes us so unique, is that we have a focus on students that don't have accessibility to competition. In tournaments you have to pay registration fees, coaching and judging fees. The cost is too large for some schools. [New York City Urban Debate League](#) allows that level of accessibility for all schools that would want to debate, but can't afford to have that possibility.

**Erik:** This weekend we are going to [Harvard University High School Tournament](#), one of the largest and most competitive

tournaments in the nation. We have a travel team that provides free travel opportunities for students to compete at Harvard, Yale and Princeton. [New York City Urban Debate League](#) is creating access for all students. Another point too, is that it is not just for top students in their schools. New York City Urban Debate League is accessible for all, from students in special education to valedictorians. Every student could be a great debater and every student should be a great debater, especially today public speaking, critical thinking and public events.

**In your opinion, what is the relationship between debate and democracy?**



**Erik:** President Obama stated in his [speech](#), that you might not know that you could be a next president or a [Supreme Court Justice](#), until you join your school's debate team.

**Aubrey:** Access! Democracy is only functional if it's

accessible to people. When you are in a totalitarian state, how can you have access to democracy? But if you can use debate, or if you are able to have accessibility to speak on a given issue, to listen, critically examine, use it as a way to stimulate change and reform. For a student to want to say things that can change the world and add democracy to many people's lives, it assumes that this person is trained to do so. That is where debate comes into play: you can learn the skills that are necessary to communicate, to question and to interrogate. When you get to that point where you are skillful, then the sky is the limit! We have had presidents with a major goal to spread democracy across the world. Where did they get trained? Probably on a debate team! Even President [Obama](#) argued in [defense of speech and debate](#), as being critical for students today. Access is where our League comes into play. [Sonia Sotomayor](#) was a former debater. She got into [Princeton University](#) because she participated in debate at her school in the Bronx. She was in a [National Catholic Forensic League](#).

**Erik:** That is an interesting point you raised about access, Aubrey. If she did not have a debate team, or a debate coach in her school, who knows if [Sotomayor](#) would have been the first [Hispanic](#)

Supreme Court Justice. There are thousands of students in the Bronx, and we just have this one person, Sotomayor. How many other presidents and Supreme Court justices are we missing, because students don't have access to those opportunities? There are kids that sit silent in a classroom, but they do have all those ideas. They want to change the world, but they don't have an opportunity to do so. I was a teacher in the Bronx for over 10 years. I can count the number of schools on one hand that had debate teams. It's an academic travesty, as debate is critical to democracy, to getting students into college, getting students excited about civics and becoming the next generation of leaders. A school that does not have a debate is a lost opportunity for a student who can become our next president, Martin Luther King Jr or Sonia Sotomayor.

**What resources do you find helpful while preparing students for debate? How exactly do you prepare for an upcoming debate?**



**Erik:** Top debaters use one very important resource, the Library. For example, in the Policy Debate there is one topic for the whole year. This year's topic was

U.S. China Relations and next year it's Educational Reform. I would go through every single book in the Library, every single periodical in the Library on Educational Reform. Back in my day, I build up five or six tubs of evidence and roll them around on a dolly. In our days all this information is stored on a laptop. By reading every single perspective on a particular given topic you basically earn a Master's Degree in High School. For Public Forum Debate the topic changes every month, so you are reading every single current event periodical. The topic guides your choice of reading. In traditional Middle School or High School students might not have the

"Top debaters use one very important resource, the Library."

perspectives that philosophy, critical studies, feminism or ethnic studies could provide.

**Aubrey:** Debate is ninety percent preparation, nine percent articulation, and one percent luck. The best teams are always the most prepared. Public Debate format is built for having an awareness of current events. Being able to distinguish what is good vs. bad information is key. We are going into a generation where students have to cipher through what is good vs what is bad knowledge production. Where do you get your news from? Information is the first step to a successful debate. We are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, so it's important to be familiar with how to use databases. We are trying for students to have research skills necessary for college.



**Eric:** As a High School debater, I remember going to a library to look at microfilm and microfiche. It was the most exciting thing to go to the library and hunt for new evidence. In this era it's just Google and that is why today libraries are so critical to debate.

**Courtney:** I love libraries! I have New York Public Library's card and Queens Library' cards and use them to access to all those online resources. I usually read eBooks on my phone. I love Mid-Manhattan library and I love Schwartzman Research Library, the library with the lions.

**Aubrey:** Some libraries are just pretty to go to. I lived in Harlem and had the pleasure and the privilege of going to Schomburg Center. If you think about academics and knowledge production, you can't think of the greatest background to debate other than a library. In an ideal world we would have a debate club in a library. Evidence based argumentation exist for students to know how to research. High level or research skills it part of preparation for



debate. Libraries and debate is like a match made in heaven! If a debate would be located in a library, the first lesson would start here. For me it would be really inspirational, because for me it would be a right of passage for debaters - you haven't really done the debate until you have done it in the library!

**How can New York Public Library assist New York Urban Debate League?**

**Erik:** The focus is research and that is why we are always looking for a library to host scholar's seminars, class visits and other debate related events.

**Could a specific book provide some insight on best practices in debate?**

**Courtney:** There is no debate Bible. It just shows how interdisciplinary debate is, because we can't really give you a single book. It all depends on what, as a debater, you want to learn.

**Given the critical importance of debate to democracy and incredible benefits and opportunities it offers to the students, do you think debate should become mandatory in schools, a part of public education?**

**Erik:** In history debate has always been mandatory. In the tradition of classical education in Ancient Greece and beyond, debate and public speaking were parts of the core curriculum. Socrates built his entire teaching philosophy on questioning and interrogation, debate and public speaking for all citizens of Athens. In every society debate should be mandatory for students and for adults.

**Aubrey:** It's funny you even ask this question because our upcoming Policy Debate topic for the year is about Education Reform. What should the Federal Government fund and support, in terms of primary and secondary education? One answer is to make debate mandatory in public schools. If you are able to articulate reasons why debate is great, and if federal government, was funding it, I can assure you that we would be as competitive as many other nations in terms of literacy, and probably in other subset skills like STEM, as debate is interdisciplinary.

In fact one school, MS 50, is entirely based on debate. They pride themselves on doing debate. Debate is more popular in their school than basketball! In the structure of today's public schools you have

to worry about standardized testing. Standardized tests could be outliers and it's difficult to just predict success based on them alone. Debate becomes supplemental to what students learn in class, or in some cases, I should say barely learn. Program like debate, for example, provide students with an opportunity to become scholars. When I was a student, I did not go to a specialized High School, but debate gave me the accessibility to compete and ability to understand students from others schools. Debate bridges the gap. We have the same resources and we are equal to the other teams.



**Have you ever heard a debate that changed your own views on a particular topic?**

**Aubrey:** You grow as a person, so even if you disagree, later on you keep thinking: maybe.

**Courtney:** Maybe when you hear the argument you have never heard

before you might be thinking: I never thought about it that way, but here is a new way of considering it.

**What role do volunteers play in your league?**

**Aubrey:** First step is to judge. People tend to forget what it is the lifeblood of the League. The League does not exist without a tournament. We can't have tournaments without judges. You can have the debaters, but then they are just talking to each other. Someone has to adjudicate the debate. If a person just wants to spend an afternoon, or a day listening to our students talk about various issues, that will make us successful league.

**Erik:** No experience is required! We do a judge workshop and the whole point of Public Forum Debates in citizen judges. You don't need to be a champion debater to adjudicate a debate round. Students have to adapt to any audience and any judge. There are