Reel to Real

National tournament offers real-life look at “The Great Debaters”

By VALERIE ORLEANS vorleans@fullerton.edu

In 1935, students from an historically black college in Texas broke through the color line to win national recognition by beating the top-ranked debaters from the nation’s prestigious universities.

The story of Wiley College Professor Motives B. Tobon and his all-black team inspired the new film, “The Great Debaters,” produced by Oprah Winfrey and directed by Denzel Washington.

While today’s “great debaters” don’t face the same level of discrimination, they do face formidable obstacles, said the coach of Cal State Fullerton’s award-winning debate team, Jon Bruschke.

Bruschke, professor of human communication studies, has coached teams that have been victorious against the likes of Harvard, Berkeley, Northwestern and USC.

“We are passionate about our topics because some of us have real experience with those issues. A lot of debate teams are researching areas where they haven’t necessarily experienced some of the situations we have. That’s what I love about our team — we’re really grounded in reality.”

— ELEECIA BARKSDALE

Bruschke and his fellow debaters. What is meaningful for us is, after I’ve debated a topic, I may actually have changed somebody’s point of view.”

Unlike many of the Ivy League universities they compete against, Cal State Fullerton’s team doesn’t have a large budget. While their competition flies to tournaments, the Fullerton debate team often squeezes into Bruschke’s van for the road trip.

“There are other differences as well. “The Cal State Fullerton team does two things that are not always priorities in competition that emphasize technical skills and details,” Bruschke said. “We always try to say something socially significant, and we always try to connect the issues we are debating to the lives of actual people. It’s a strategy that has put us in the top 16 in the nation for five years in a row.”

“Many of the debaters on CSUF’s team were first introduced to the concept of debate through SCUDL — the Southern California Urban Debate League, in which debaters at Cal State Fullerton worked with economically underserved high school students who may have had no opportunity to get involved with a debate team. With limited funding to pay for tournament fees, transportation and school support, the outreach program has been curtailed. However, CSUF debaters continue to work with students to help them develop the skills they will need as college-level debaters.”

“We are training the next generation of great debaters,” Bruschke said.

National Debate Tournament Set for March 27-31

The last five days in March will see the arrival of more than 100 of America’s best college debaters at the National Debate Tournament (NDT), hosted this year by Cal State Fullerton. As part of the university’s 50th anniversary, the tournament will feature 78 debate teams from across the nation. Each team will attempt to bring home top honors.

Often referred to as the equivalent of the NCAA “March Madness” basketball tournament, the NDT requires that debaters complete a rigorous qualification procedure just to enter the event. The top 16 teams in the nation get automatic bids. Everyone else has to qualify through district tournaments, taking place this month.

The NDT began at the United States Military Academy in 1947 and was organized and coordinated at West Point for the first 20 years. Since 1967, the tournament has been hosted by a different school each year. Last year, Cal State Fullerton received one of the automatic bids to enter the tournament.

The team of Luis Magallon and Brenda Montes finished in the top ten for speakers. Magallon, with his new debate partner, Caitlin Gray, hopes to compete this year.

“We are training the next generation of great debaters,” Bruschke said.

— JON BRUSCHKE