

## **Julia Burke Award, TOC 2003**

I have to be honest and say that I haven't come to this Julia Burke award presentation since the first one four years ago. Although I coached Julia and played an active role in the creation of the award, normally I'm standing outside this room away from the door asking if it's over yet so that I can come in. For me, as for most of us who knew Julia, this loss will always be intensely personal. We lost a debater, a daughter, a student, and a friend. For me the experience has always been too intense and too personal to watch the video and see the presentation of the award. For months after the accident I had flashbacks of Julia and her blond ponytail bounding out the door after the last debate team meeting she attended at College Prep. The accident that took her life couldn't have happened more than a few minutes after she left that room.

So for the next few years, I couldn't be part of this event because of those memories. I refused to watch the video, and refused to relive everything that I had been pretty successful at blocking out. This presentation for me became all about my own personal pain and loss, which I'd locked away, so of course I had to avoid it.

But recently I had a conversation with Lexy Green in which she pointed out an incredibly profound post to an online debate forum that made me realize that instead of seeing this award for what it is, a celebration of the debate community, I'd used it as an excuse to feel sorry for myself. That post reads:

'More than anything else, this activity has exposed me to people that I love... what I do know is this: this award matters more to me than anything else because it is about the people that we live with. Even if I'm fortunate to win the TOC or NFLs, it will mean positively nothing to me compared to the people I have met in this activity.'

This post says to me that something is changing in the debate community. It's becoming ok to talk about the way you treat each other. It's also becoming ok to be self-reflective and express the results of the reflections to each other, something I can't imagine happening when I was debating. In fact Marilyn Burke and I were walking through the hotel just last night past a group of you sitting in a hallway talking about the award and the nominees and whom you voted for and why. This award is now about our community as a whole. The values that it symbolizes are part of what it means to be a member of this community. We now expect these values in each other. And, what is most telling of the real depth of transformation our community has experienced, we expect these values in ourselves.

It is said, and I believe, that the greatest compliment one person can pay to another is 'I am a better person for having known you.' Aside from the thrill of competition, I think the main reason for our staying in such a demanding activity, even if we don't always recognize it, is that we like who we become when we are around each other. And this award is our opportunity as a community to recognize someone who embodies the characteristics we have come to appreciate and to say to that someone we are all better people, and thus a better community, because you have been part of it.

This year's Julia Burke award winner has of course had great tournament success throughout the course of the year. You're all no doubt aware of these successes. More revealing are the personal insights offered by a few people I've spoken to this weekend. One fellow debater recalls a discussion of the debate community at DDI where the winner offered the motto: I always debate happy so I can enjoy the activity. This year's winner makes the activity fun so that you can enjoy the game so much more while debating this person.

A coach offered this insight: There are smart debaters and then there are smart people who debate, and this year's winner is a smart person who debates. What's the difference, I asked this coach? He told me that for him, a smart debater is the chess master, the person who sees the debate strategy and executes it well in every case. On the other hand, a smart person who debates has an innate intellectual curiosity, a love for learning and for sharing knowledge, and is someone who with or without this sharp strategic sense, is a great debater just because of the depth and sensitivity of their thinking.

So today please join with me in saying that this community is a far better one for having as one of its members, Noah Chestnut.