

Comments at Julia Burke's Funeral
By Ryan Mills
Debate Coach and Mentor

Before her last vacation, Julia came into the debate office looking for some recreational reading material. Recreational reading material for Julia wasn't an old Harlequin romance or the latest Danielle Steele, but more like Aristotle, Nietzsche, or James Joyce. I handed her a collection of short stories by Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, which in her typical absent-mindedness she of course proceeded to lose soon after reading. When she returned from her vacation she told me how much she had enjoyed a story entitled "The Garden of Forking Paths," a story which, when I read it yesterday, I found contains the following prophetic lines:

your ancestor did not believe in a uniform and absolute time; he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another contains all possibilities. In most of these times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. In this one, which the favoring hand of chance has dealt me, you have come into my life.

I have many fond memories of Julia at debate tournaments, but rather than on her successes or her ability to discuss with authority distinctions between tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, I look back with special fondness on the everyday experiences we shared. For example, the times we spent scouring high school and college campuses from Texas to Tennessee looking for her backpack which she casually set down to rush to greet a friend or coach whom she had not seen in, oh, a week or so at the previous tournament. But those absences from her friends, no matter how brief, were like an eternity to Julia. I admit to an occasional frustration over her failure to remember what until a week ago I considered the important things.

But it's so suddenly become so obvious to me that she was the one who had had it right all along. The importance of people not things; your integrity, not your successes; your contributions, not your awards. In an activity which breeds so many takers, Julia was a true giver.

One final revealing anecdote: This past weekend in Dallas Julia and her partner Jon Neril had on Saturday night lost in the octa-finals of the St. Mark's tournament. Whereas I am sure she was up until well after midnight socializing with her debate friends, I discovered her at 9 a.m. the following morning watching the debate round in which our sophomore team was competing. In fact, although trying herself to prepare for one of the most competitive tournaments of the year, Julia had for the week leading up to this tournament basically taken over my job, coaching Cort and Elliot in my absence, as I tried to cope with the death of my father a couple of weeks before. But in typical Julia fashion she needed no prompting; she saw my need and had filled it before I had to humiliate myself to ask.

Rather than regret that Julia has gone ahead of us on a fork in our life's path that none of us yet has access to, I prefer to be grateful for the length of time that her path was allowed to converge with ours. Our roads ran parallel for too short a time but, if as Borges writes, "our lives are paths

which fork and intersect," rather than falling away from our paths, Julia, in typical Julia fashion, has merely continued to forge her own.