

## Speech and Debate in the Time of Covid

by Neil Cawley

“Two down?” the teenager in the suit and tie asks. He stares at me through my laptop. A long silence.

“Um, sure. That’s fine,” I respond. He’s on to me, I know it.

“Two down,” he calmly explains, “means that when I’ve spoken for five minutes you hold up two fingers to indicate that I only have two minutes left, then one finger when I have one minute. Then display a fist if I reach the time limit, which I won’t.”

I’m being lectured by a high school student. At an online speech and debate tournament.

It’s not that I don’t know what “two down” means. I was involved in speech as a competitor and volunteer judge for over twenty years. “Two down” is our *lingua franca*, like “pick off” in baseball, or “onside kick” in football. I understand the term. It’s just that I’m unsure of myself because it’s been many years since I’ve done this so I’m struggling to remember how it all works. Plus, the kid’s standing in his family bathroom. The strangeness of evaluating these students in their homes from my computer is a little disconcerting.

“Ready when you are,” I say at last.

The New York State Forensics League held its annual high school championship remotely, like all such contests in the time of Covid. Yes, speech and debate is also called forensics. I have no idea why. Some competitors, like the kid lecturing me about “two down,” perform in cramped bathrooms, or unfinished basements. Others speak from spacious, well-appointed living rooms that dwarf my house.

The great thing about forensics was that you never knew where the kids were from. Was the girl with the lilting Irish accent the daughter of a diplomat or a carpenter? Was the boy in the blazer from an elite Manhattan program like Regis or Stuyvesant, or a more blue-collar outer borough school? The competitors don’t wear team uniforms.

They're supposed to be relatively anonymous to keep things fair. But because of Covid you learn a little about them from being invited virtually into their homes. So you strive to put aside any preconceptions and just listen.

The boy's speech is excellent. He starts with a creative introduction. His three areas of analysis are logical and well-developed, with support from important publications like *The Economist*. He does a nice job analyzing the economic impact of President Biden's climate initiative, speaking crisply and entirely from memory. As he finishes, it strikes me that there are hundreds of smart young people just like him all across New York performing in bathrooms, family rooms, bedrooms, basements and attics, in unison. They're reciting poetry, debating the issues of the day, acting out scenes from Tony Award-winning plays, and delivering their own orations, which they've been honing all year. They are undeterred, and betting on normalcy to make a comeback.

If you've ever stumbled upon an army of well-dressed teenagers with backpacks and briefcases streaming into a high school on a Saturday morning, chances are there's a speech and debate tournament taking place. The competitions last all day and by the time the awards ceremony rolls around, the seriousness has lifted. You'll see the kids socializing with one another, sharing music, exchanging numbers. These were the special friends you'd see only once or twice a month during the school year.

Speech kids are a bit clannish. They keep a mental list of the competition in case they meet in the future, and they remember every celebrity who has ever participated as a point of pride. Brad Pitt did speech. So did Oprah Winfrey. She was nice enough to have some students perform on her show. Even *The Avengers* got in on the act. Chadwick Boseman, aka Black Panther, finished 8<sup>th</sup> in the nation in 1995 in the category of Original Oratory. Paul Rudd competed in two national championships long before becoming Ant-Man. Scores of notable politicians, journalists and business people also participated, including three sitting Supreme Court justices.

Aside from paving the way to success—and even stardom—forensics also comes in handy in everyday life. In my senior year of high school, the AP English exam featured a question on Sylvia Plath. I had never read any of her poems in class, but I'd competed all year with someone who performed a monologue based on Plath's tragic

life and work, so I knew her poetry well. From memory I jotted down line after line in my exam booklet. I sometimes wonder about the grader who read my essay and must have thought, “who cribs Sylvia Plath?”

During the tournament I “run into” old friends I haven’t seen in years, still at it, still dedicating so much of their lives to the students. We reconnect and start texting. Then the subject comes up, the reason I’m here in the first place.

“I’m really sorry to hear about Joe,” they say.

“It was a shock,” I tell them. “The funeral is next week. The kids are devastated. The school reached out to see if I could judge. A new teacher set up a call for me to give the team a pep talk. He’s been really helpful.”

Coach Joe Russo was the heart of the Cathedral Prep speech program. Cathedral is a small Catholic high school in the middle of Queens. Many of its students are first generation like me. Their families come from all over the world, reflective of the incredible diversity of the city. We graduates like to boast that Vince Lombardi went there. Actually, Vince Lombardi attended the other Cathedral Prep on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, transformed now into pricey condominiums. Why he transferred before graduation remains an unsolved New York mystery.

The speech team started in the early ‘80s but had fallen on hard times when Joe got there twenty-five years ago. He rebuilt the program, convincing parents and alumni to give up their weekends to help. Not long after sunrise on the day of a tournament, Joe and the team would pile into school vans, parent cars, or the subway to get to a competition somewhere in the city. They’d return by nightfall exhausted, many with trophies and big smiles. Joe was behind it all. His sudden passing has left an enormous hole in all our hearts. Joe had an infectious sense of humor that kept everything light. He’d find it comical to see me sitting in my Massachusetts home, remotely judging the New York state championship in his place.

I don’t know what to expect from these teenagers at first. They should be self-centered, entitled, damaged by social media and video games, right? But what I see here shatters my prejudices. They are earnest and dedicated, much more so than I was all those years ago. They talk compellingly about what’s meaningful in their lives. It’s all so complicated now: the pandemic, racism, depression, the environment, the downside

of technology. There's an underlying sadness here, an unspoken fear that what has been lost might never return. All I can do is say thank you, rank them from one through five, and type brief comments about how they did. If only I could tell them that they've opened my eyes.

Interest in speech and debate is on the decline today, and that's a shame. The time commitment for coaches is enormous, and finding schools generous enough to host weekend competitions is no easy task. Public speaking is a direct medium based upon the ideals of classical rhetoric, the stuff of Aristotle and Cicero. For centuries rhetoric was considered an art, a centerpiece of formal education at all levels. Maybe that's impractical today when shallow talking points have replaced thoughtful conversation, and dialogue is reduced to short bursts of information. Rhetoric is no longer art, but has become artifice.

Thankfully, these kids never got the memo. Despite all the fates that conspired against them this year they've persisted, undaunted. There's one team, a girl and a boy, who perform selected scenes from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Although they're standing in different screens, unable to see one another, I'm almost moved to tears by the beauty of their acting. For a moment I forget we're all somewhere else. There is transcendence in a story well told, and a speech well delivered. I now know why Joe worked as hard as he did for so many years, why he sacrificed so much for these students. What he received was every bit as fulfilling as what he gave.

After the tournament I reach out to the helpful teacher at Cathedral Prep to see how the team fared. I'm hopeful he'll continue the tradition of speech and debate at that small high school in the middle of Queens. Everyone is proud of what they accomplished, even if they didn't win any trophies.

"The national championship is coming up," he tells me. "Maybe you could help us prepare? We have two competing this year."

"Be glad to," I say. "Let's do it for Joe."



**Neil Cawley** is a lawyer and writer who followed the tide from Queens to Cape Cod. His "Requiem for a Strip Club" won second prize in the 2021 Seán O'Faoláin short story competition and will be published in the Irish literary journal *Southword* this spring. Neil is currently working on a series of stories about first generation New Yorkers in the years before 9/11 titled *Outer Boroughs*.