

K. M. DICOLANDREA:

On Speaking Your Truth

compiled by
Greyson Koinzan
and Katie Hines

K. M. DiColandrea (They, Them, Their), better known as DiCo by students and friends, serves as the head coach and speech and debate teacher at Achievement First Brooklyn High School in Brooklyn, New York. Since its founding in 2011, the team has found national-level success at NSDA Nationals and other competitive tournaments across the country. Like many coaches, DiCo started speech and debate in high school, competing primarily in Extemp and qualifying to the National Tournament in Congress their senior year. Here, DiCo shares more about their journey.

What drove you to pursue speech and debate?

► Speech and debate is where I got my education. As an educator myself now, I feel obligated to pay the opportunity forward to other students.



Photo Credits: (left) Donald Haffenden • (opposite) Leonore Waldrip

What classes do you teach? What has been your favorite class to teach?

► I have the best schedule in the world: Extemp, Congress, Debate, and Interp. That is my full schedule. I teach each class every day. My favorite class to teach of those four? Too tough to call.

How has this activity changed your life?

► On the fifth day of my junior year of high school, the twin towers were attacked and destroyed three blocks away. The only thing that helped pulled me out of the deep depression that followed was the opportunity on Saturday mornings to speak my truth about our broken world

in Extemp, Congress, and Oratory rounds.

Briefly tell us about your program and what makes it unique.

► Achievement First Brooklyn High School is a high-performing charter school in Crown Heights that offers a rigorous academic course load to students in a college-preparatory setting. It is a Title I school where 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch and 100 percent of students identify as people of color. What makes our program unique is that we are one of the only inner-city public schools competing across all of the events (speech, debate, congress) on the national circuit.

What impact does speech and debate have on your students?

► My students are all people of color, and most of them live in low-income households. Our country has failed them and their families in so many ways, but my students are resilient and powerful. I have seen students completely transform in their four years on the team. As an example, one of our girls literally stopped at the threshold of her first tournament and could not walk into the room. The room was filled with young White men in suits, and she was the only woman of color in the space. That girl later went on to become our team president and our first student to qualify

for CFLs. More important than the trophies she went on to win, she found the confidence to speak her truth in Original Oratory about her experiences as a Mexican woman in America.

Speech and debate empowers my students to courageously speak their own truths: the truth about how their parents are deported, about how they are racially profiled by the police, about how they are systematically oppressed just because of the color of their skin. Once they find that power, no one can take it away from them. Our alumni—80 percent of whom are the first in their family to attend college—have gone on to top colleges including Yale, Princeton, Wesleyan, Bowdoin, Smith, Lawrence, and Bates where they are making waves on campus as student leaders.

How does your work with the Brooklyn Debate League differ from coaching at your high school?

► We host tournaments on Friday nights for middle school and high school students. I got the idea to start the league when I took my first kids to CFLs a few years ago and met a mother of a freshman who had qualified in Original Oratory. It turns out she

had paid thousands of dollars to enroll her child in a speech and debate “academy” in middle school so she would get a head start. It didn’t seem fair that students who could afford to pay thousands of dollars in middle school could get this advantage, so I started the league as an opportunity for middle school students in Brooklyn.

We have since expanded it to include JV divisions for high school freshmen and sophomores. We have a diverse membership in the league: kids from public schools, charter schools, parochial schools, and even private schools compete against each other. We try hard to make the space less about the competition and more about the activity. We kick off every awards ceremony with an opportunity for the kids to shout out each other, and they frequently will shout out students from other teams who helped them, who inspired them, who impressed them, etc. The league is also an opportunity for students to step up as leaders: most of the tabulation and judging is done by experienced juniors and seniors.

What is the biggest piece of advice you have given your

students? How have they used your advice to better themselves?

► Don’t be afraid to speak your truth. The trophies are nice, but at the end of the day, you’re going to throw away the awards and forget the ranks. What you’re going to remember is what it felt like to hit your stride when speaking your truth in front of other people. When done right, it should feel like flying, and there’s nothing else like it. More importantly, when done right, people will learn from you and will remember what you taught them. That’s why we do this.

What is the highlight of your coaching career?


► The best part about coaching is getting to work with such brilliant young people. The highlight of my coaching career so far was when our team president Oluseyi advanced to quarterfinals at NSDA Nationals last year. She had been getting to finals on the national circuit in Duo and Humorous Interpretation since she was a junior, but she chose to spend senior year competing with an Original Oratory about her experience as a Black woman in speech and debate. She won our District Student of the Year award, qualified for NSDA Nationals, and then got to

quarters. I still cannot fully articulate how proud I am of her.

In your opinion, why is speech and debate important? What impact can it have on a person?

► Speech and debate changes the trajectories of kids’ lives. My students are the strongest people I have ever met. They have endured homelessness, domestic abuse, sexual assault, racial profiling, the incarceration of parents, the deportation of parents, even in some cases the death of parents. But that does not hold them back. Even when everything around them tries to silence them, they learn through speech and debate not to be silent anymore.

What are the best three words to describe yourself?

► Small but mighty. We have a Latin translation of that phrase on our team hoodies and everyone thinks it’s like a fancy official Latin saying... nope. Just me being silly. 

Greyson Koinzan is a senior from Mountain Vista High School in Colorado. She currently serves as a publications intern for the National Speech & Debate Association.

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