

As many of you know, I have been an active member of the IPDA community since 2001. Coming from a policy background, IPDA was a brand new concept for me, a debate format based on rhetoric and inclusivity, not just talking really fast and pulling cards. I have been with the organization through many changes, and though the heart of the format remains the same, the organization has grown fully into its own. The one true constant I can speak to is what I believe makes a genuinely special coach.

Throughout the entirety of my debate career, I have heard countless times how much we value education. In my opinion, education goes so far beyond what we teach students about theory and what we can teach them in the 30 minutes leading up to a round. Oftentimes, these students are away from home for the first time, in strange and perhaps alienating environments, and unaware of their own struggle to find themselves and a home away from home. Providing these young adults with an educational environment that challenges them and encourages their individual growth without placing a premium on season long points or winning at all costs is just as important. While debate is a competition, that competitiveness shouldn't come at the expense of seeing the wonder of a young mind making the connections for themselves that you've made for them hundreds, if not thousands of times before. To see them blossoming in a healthy environment is one of the truest joys of mentorship, coaching, and teaching of any kind. There is no greater disservice I can think of than a coach creating an environment where that is NOT the priority.

I have been lucky in my experience to have been coached by more of the former than the latter. I am lucky that I now get to call these people my friends. I don't remember the year Megan and I met, roughly 20 years is a long time, nor do I remember what school she was with when we met. What I do remember about Megan is that she has always strived to be a coach that encourages her students. She makes sure that they understand that she is interested and invested in them beyond their points or point potential. She truly cares about her students as debaters, and beyond that, cares about who they are and who they will become. Every one of her students receives her genuine devotion and attention.

I mentioned coaches that left positive impacts on my life. One of these people was Bennet Strange, a coach that was not my own but always willing to help me whenever I faced (what I'm sure at the time was) a very immediate and important crisis for a 19-21 year old college student unable to find my own coach. His even-toned "Miss Hale, everything will be okay. We can fix it" did wonders to calm me down. Our interactions did more for me than I was ever able to express to him. As I cannot speak from experience of having been one of his students, I can speak to the positive impact that even small interactions like that had on my life. Because sometimes students just need a coach to tell them it's just debate and "we can fix it".

When thinking about candidates for Coach of the Year, I cannot think of anyone who truly and as wholeheartedly embodies what I believe an exemplary coach to be more than Megan Smith.

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