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The Benefits of Oratory and Debate at Mount Mercy Speak for Themselves

The Mount Mercy Academy Oratory and Debate Team is recognized both throughout the state as well as nationally for its communication prowess. Mount Mercy Academy is one of ten schools in Western New York that fields an Oratory and Debate team. Not only is Mount Mercy one of a few schools with a team, the Catholic College Preparatory High School is the only all-female school that has a team.

Oratory and Debate, which is also called Forensics, has many different components. The Oratory elements of the competitions include Oral Interpretation (interpreting and reading prose or poetry), Duo Interpretation (two partners act out a scene from a play), Dramatic Interpretation (one person acts out a play); Oratory (speaker writes and presents her own speech), Declamation (speaker recites a previously written speech) and Extemporaneous (the speaker writes a speech about current events). There are two debate formats; Lincoln/Douglas (one person against another) or Public Forum Debate (pairs debate each other). Debaters must be prepared to present both sides of an argument.

The participants receive written comments and their placement in the competition from the judges. The competitors are then ranked from top to bottom based on their scores. Students then qualify for state and national competitions based on their performances during the ten local competitions held in Buffalo and Rochester. The New York State Championships are being held in Long Island and the Nationals are in Sacramento, California.

In addition, when students compete in the local tournaments, they become members of the National Forensic League, the oldest Honor Society in the country. There are different levels of recognition that they can achieve in the National Forensic League, dependent upon how well students do at the local level. The Mount Mercy team is a member of the Buffalo-Albany Region and has received the prestigious chapter award for the region three times

Mount Mercy's team is extremely fortunate to be coached by Miss Catherine Luhr, an active participant or coach in oratory and debate since 1972. Luhr has been Mount Mercy's coach for the past 32 years. She began in oratory and debate as a freshman in high school participating all four years, continued competing during her four years in college and coached at the University of Virginia for two years. While she was a student she was a State Champion and National Finalist in several different events. As a coach at the University of Virginia, she coached state and national champions.

Luhr is the president of The Buffalo Catholic Forensic League, State Director for the New York State Forensics League and serves on the service award, protest and election committees of the National Forensic League. She is the chairman of the election committee. Luhr is also a past president of the National Forensic League.

All students are welcome to become members of oratory and debate. Luhr helps the young women select the best event for them to participate in and also helps them select their material. She then is available to help them practice and prepare for competition.

Four seniors have qualified to represent Mount Mercy at the National Championships in May. Tara Kennelly (Buffalo) and Sarah O'Shei (West Seneca) and McKenzie Cerrone (Orchard Park) and Stephanie Evaniak (Buffalo) will all participate in Duo Interpretation. Junior Diana Henshaw (West Seneca) has qualified for the New York State Championships in Oratory. Other team members include senior Lily Krasner (Orchard Park) in duo interpretation, sophomores DesTiny Overton (Buffalo) and Kathryn Marrabella (Cheektowaga) in duo interpretation and freshman Abbigayle Reid (Buffalo) in Declamation.

There are many benefits to participating in Oratory and Debate. Luhr believes that Forensics helps participants develop leadership skills, learn to communicate more effectively and provides valuable experiences that will benefit competitors later in life. Luhr remarked that membership in the National Forensic League is highly valued by institutes of higher education, another perk attained through competing in oratory and debate.

Kathleen Mehlretter, president of the Mount Mercy Academy Board of Trustees and a retired United States Attorney was a member of oratory and debate at Mount Mercy Academy. Being a part of

Oratory and Debate provided an important head start on her future career. “My senior year, the debate topic was reforming trial by jury. I did research in the UB Law Library, reading law review articles and court cases. I enjoyed the legal research and when I went to law school I knew how to analyze court cases and to apply them to new facts. I also improved my public speaking style, which was important for a trial lawyer,” Mehlretter stated.

Mary Ann Kostusiak, a Mount Mercy alumna who is a successful business woman who worked for the Computer Task Group for many years and now works for Hodgson Ross as an IT Project Manager also benefitted from her time in oratory and debate. “I joined debate and oratory because I was very shy as a teenager and wanted to be more comfortable speaking in public. That is a skill that helped me throughout college and my career,” Kostusiak commented.

Sharon Porcellio, an attorney with Bond, Schoeneck and King and an alumna of Mount Mercy is another member of oratory and debate whose career was enhanced by her experiences. “Being part of oratory and debate taught me the necessity of recognizing and learning both sides of an argument to be effective at advocating a position on either side of an issue, how to organize an effective argument, how to strategize and how to work with colleagues. The experience gave you the confidence to speak in public and most importantly, afforded you the opportunity to form lifelong friendships with your teammates and competitors. It was truly a worthwhile effort,” Porcellio remarked.

Many other past members of Mount Mercy Oratory and Debate have gone on to prominent careers. Some of these illustrious graduates include Julia Hall of Amnesty International, attorney Kathleen Lindhardt, Jewel Riordan of Boston Scientific, who works in Sydney, Australia and Sara Mehlretter Drury, PhD, an assistant professor in Rhetoric at Wabash College in Indiana.

There are many aspects of oratory and debate that Luhr enjoys, as evidenced by the almost 45 years that she has spent involved in the field. “I love the opportunity to work with the students. It is especially rewarding when students who never thought that they could stand up and speak in public are successful in oratory and debate. It is amazing how so many students from so many different careers tell me how much oratory and debate has helped them in their lives and careers. I made friends when I first joined debate in high school and college that are still my friends today,” Luhr remarked.



Mount Mercy Academy

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