

CDS's Debate Team prepped to take on the world at the International Independent Schools Public Speaking Competition

By Jim Stewart

Kerstin Wyndham-West, the legendary Debate and Public Speaking Coach at Country Day School in King City, fills a room with positive energy when we meet for a Friday afternoon interview. The educator has been retired for four years, but continues to teach the fine art of debate and rhetoric in the most inspirational manner.

Wyndham-West has been coaching the CDS Debate Team to lofty heights for over 22 years, but she derives the most satisfaction in both seeing her students succeed after they have left her mentorship and in seeing the debate program flourish.

“It's very satisfying to watch students later in life using their skills. They often come back to visit and share stories about their success. Seeing the growth of the program is really satisfying, too. Our team is currently comprised of 25-30 students.”

Coach Wyndham-West has been diligently preparing her team for success in Vancouver next week at the IISPSC (International Independent Schools Public Speaking Competition) and is quietly optimistic about her team's prospects on the West Coast.

“We've got a pretty strong team. Two of our three competitors were at the World Championships last year in South Africa. This is an experienced team, they're accustomed to a very high level of competition, and they're prepped for all the challenges that come with competing against students from across the world.”

In addition to preparing her team of 30 students for various levels of competition during the 2023-24 school year, the veteran teacher-coach is also mentoring Antonella Costanzo, a CDS colleague, a Middle and Senior School Math/Science teacher, who has been assisting and learning from a seasoned Debate Coach.

“Antonella has been a big help in growing our program and I appreciate her contributions as a teacher at CDS. She has helped make our team as successful as it is.”

When asked about how important the art of debating and public speaking is in 2023, Wyndham-West makes a great case for its value as both a co-curricular activity and, more importantly, a key life skill that's necessary in a high-functioning democracy.

“In the 21st century, it is extremely relevant to provide arguments and support them with real content.

The art of persuasion is an important part of the democratic process and being able to persuade is an important skill for today's students. The same skills apply. Listening to nuances and noting body language expression are just as important as they've always been. All work environments—especially ones with daily interactions between people—require a certain level of confidence when a person enters a room. Learning the art of debating and public speaking prepares our students for success and the confidence they need in the 21st century workplace.”

Preparing for that 21st century workplace and the IISPSC in Vancouver is the energetic quartet of Sarah Croxon, Diviya Amarnath, Millie Steinmann, and Ethan Walba who join us after Period 3 for our interview and inject another dose of positive energy into the room on a Friday afternoon.

Croxon, Amarnath, and Steinmann are the experienced debaters to which Coach Wyndham-West alluded earlier and they provide insight into the value of competing in the World Championships in Durban, South Africa in the 2022-23 school year.

Amarnath, a Grade 11 student, noted that the 2023 competition in South Africa was a valuable experience because “it was the first time I made the Finals and in addition to learning about apartheid while we were in South Africa, there were opportunities to learn

about South African customs and traditions. We enjoyed the week prior to the tournament and to see so many different things made the trip so enjoyable. I made lots of friends, too.?

Croxon, a Grade 12 student, concurred with her teammate regarding the value of the competition and travel as the best educator.

?Finding out that I made the Final and that all three of us qualified for the Final was the highlight of the competition for me. We all got to do something very special together. Travelling to South Africa was my first international trip where I could truly appreciate what I was experiencing and really spend time learning about culture. It was so cool to travel beforehand and I was coming back from a year off competing. We had our families with us, too, so it was a unique experience.?

Steinmann, a Grade 11 student, commented on not only the level of competition, but on the eye-opening experience of travelling to another continent.

?It was incredible how much we saw during the sight-seeing tours prior to the competition. It was great to see the culture and history of South Africa, but it was also enjoyable to meet students from South Africa and to talk to them about their customs.?

In addition to being moved by both the competition in Durban and the experience of international travel, the trio competing in the IISPC in Vancouver this coming week?Croxon, Steinmann, and Ethan Walba?commented on what they're looking forward to most from their trip to British Columbia.

Walba, a Grade 12 student, noted that ?Being able to get away to a different Canadian province is great?each part of Canada has its charms.? Steinmann expressed her relief that the competition won't be virtual:

?Going to a live competition rather than on-line is so much better. I've never been to Vancouver so meeting people will be so much more enjoyable in person instead of a virtual experience.?

Croxon spoke of the trip as a climactic event in her four-year high school career: ?I wanted to get back into this after a year off. In some ways it seems surreal that I'm going back to Vancouver in my final year. It feels really good and this competition will be rewarding for all of us.?

When asked to be prognosticators and describe their prospect of winning in Vancouver, all three competitors couch their language effectively.

Walba, a veteran debater, expresses an air of confidence and feels ?cautiously optimistic as a Grade 12 student in this competition,? Steinmann notes that ?knock on wood ? that we do well. It's about the experience, too,? and Croxon acknowledges that many elements make predicting an outcome difficult.

?Debates and public speaking can be so subjective. Success depends on so many factors. We've got a really good team that is experienced as well.?

There's no debate about it. Coach Kerstin Wyndham-West has her CDS competitors ready to take the West Coast by storm?one persuasive argument and rhetorical device at a time.

Upcoming Debating and Public Speaking Events at CDS this month:

In addition to travelling to debating and public speaking events, Country Day School will host the Fulford Cup for the first time since 2017. This competition is in need of judges. Community members interested in volunteering to judge at the upcoming Fulford Debate Tournament at CDS on Friday, October 27th from 3 ? 8 p.m. should email volunteer@cds.on.ca. Dinner is included.