

July 22, 2009

In Recognition: Ross K. Smith

Earlier this week the college debate community lost one of its most accomplished and influential coaches, leaders, mentors, and friends. Ross Kennedy Smith passed away on July 19, 2009, but his influence will be felt for many years.

In the shock of the last few days the debate community has paused and reflected on the ways in which Ross influenced us all. The tremendous outpouring of condolences and memories is a testament to how many lives Ross touched. As representatives of the three largest collegiate policy debate organizations we take this moment to remember a coaching legend.

For the last quarter century Ross, as Director of Debate, and Alan Loudon, as Director of Forensics, embodied the Wake Forest University Debate team. As we celebrate Ross, we also celebrate the remarkable partnership of these two remarkable forensics educators. Together they defined a standard of excellence for all debate programs. It is not always easy to highlight their accomplishments in isolation of each other, because they both exemplify such modesty. Today we celebrate their partnership as we remember Ross.

A Wake graduate himself ('82, '84), Ross started coaching the Demon Deacons in the fall of 1984 as he began one of the most significant coaching careers in the history of intercollegiate debate. As the Director of Debate at Wake Forest, Ross left his mark as a deeply committed and incredibly successful coach. His list of accomplishments is long and well-known. He coached the 1997 and 2008 National Debate Tournament National Champions, the 2006 and 2009 NDT 2nd place teams, was named National Coach of the Year in 1994 and 1998, and District VI Coach of the Year in 2000 and 2006. In Best of the Decade polling he was named Best Judge of the 1990's and Second Best Coach of the 1990's. He qualified more teams to the elimination rounds of the National Debate Tournament than any other coach in the last decade.

As remarkable as this list of accomplishments is, it only begins to appreciate his energy and his passion as an educator. Ross was a tireless advocate for bringing the very best from policy debate. A brilliant teacher, Ross was a mentor to Wake students of all competitive abilities. With leadership from Al and Ross the Wake Forest debate program has influenced hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students. Many fields owe a debt of thanks for the talented young professionals that learned from Ross. It is almost impossible, for example, to find a debate program untouched by Wake graduates.

Regardless of when they were involved with the team or if they were an undergraduate competitor or a graduate teaching assistant, these students fondly recall the influence Ross has on their development. Marcia Tierksy (WFU Class of '94) explains,

Ross was a remarkable person. He was a great mentor and a brilliant innovator. I know that I would not be the person that I am today without Ross's influence, and I could easily name 50 other people who could say the same. Ross had a great gift for making those who debated for him better. Better debaters, better thinkers, better speakers, and better people. There are no words for how much he is missed.

His influence was not just limited to those enrolled as students at Wake Forest. Ross saw competition not as a way to divide people, but as an opportunity to teach all those around him. Many of those who have shared their memories in recent days are those who competed against Ross and his Wake teams. Dan Shalmon (Berkeley, '04) shared what it was like to compete against Wake Forest,

Debate coaches are intensely competitive people. Rivalries can become intense, personal and mean. Races for the Copeland Award, which recognizes the best team of the course of a season can become downright ugly. Such races usually are waged between two, or at most three teams.... Ross was a mentor to me and my teammates. He was also the coach of the team we contended for the Copeland with most closely. Our race came right down the wire; our debates with Wake were exceedingly close and often infuriatingly so. Ross was always - and I mean without fail - friendly and supportive.

Ed Panetta, the Director of Forensics at the University of Georgia, himself a former Wake debate graduate assistant, noted this same experience of coaching against Ross,

While his teams were very competitive -- he didn't project a sense of being competitive with his professional colleagues. This is a gift that fewer and fewer coaches exhibit. When Georgia was in the finals of the (1997) NDT against Wake Forest we spent most of the debate together sharing fun memories. And, he was very gracious in victory. In fact, he was the only person left to help me move [our] evidence from the ballroom that night after the dust settled.

Debate coaches and students spend a great deal of time together during the competition season, much of it at three day competitions, known as tournaments. Never content to direct countless tabulation rooms at other schools' tournaments and host the largest regular season tournament each year, Ross always worked tirelessly to make tournaments better. As the hosts of the 'Dixie' (now renamed as the 'Franklin Shirley') college debate tournament, Ross was a driving force in improving the way that debate tournaments operate. Ross had as much influence as anyone in the last quarter-century in improving their operation.

His willingness to take risks and experiment with new practices brought many of the innovations that today the debate community takes for granted. Everything from the basic time limits for each speech, the scale used to evaluate the way in individual debaters are judged, use

of precise and accurate schedules, greater transparency in pre-tournament disclosure, and groundbreaking use of computer tabulation software were innovations developed at Wake Forest.

He strove to provide great competition and legendary hospitality. It is not surprising that the annual Wake tournament was selected as the best tournament of the both the 1980s and 1990s. The humane and professionally managed tournament attracted the very best in college policy debate and is a positive memory for everyone who attended as a coach or competitor.

Ross also influenced many more students by directing Wake's summer debate institutes for high school students, organizing public debates and teaching Debate and Advocacy at Wake Forest. His high school summer workshop and early season national high school tournament provided high quality instruction and competitive experiences for thousands of high school students from across the nation. He also edited more than twenty volumes of the "Debater's Research Guide", the most widely respected annual guide to the policy literature and arguments surrounding each year's national high school debate topics.

His service includes leadership at the national level of intercollegiate debate organizations. He served as the District IV representative to the National Debate Tournament for several terms and served on the national topic selection committee. Ross was a leading voice in making the merger of the NDT and CEDA communities possible, a tremendous step forward in the integration of our debate community. In just the last few months he played an active role in The National Development Conference on Debate, hosted at Wake Forest. He served as a member of the Best Practices Committee, a group that continued the spirit of his labors. He was a vocal and enthusiastic advocate at this forum, just as he had been his entire career.

Ross saw debate as something that was not limited to just tournament competitions. He founded the Open Source Debate Foundation, which has as its mission the connection of the research and analytic capacities of the academic debate community and its graduates to the wider political and policy communities. He cofounded DebateScoop, a community blog devoted to coverage of campaign debates led by the nation's leading debate and political communication scholars. He was active in local Democratic Party politics, including running for the Board of Education Forsyth County, NC, in 2006. He also taught regularly at the Ben Franklin Transatlantic Fellows Initiative, a U.S. Department of State-sponsored program that brought hundreds of high school students from around the world to Wake Forest for study of civic activism.

In recognition of his exemplary service, he was named the 2009 recipient of the George Ziegelmüller Award. The award, named for the longtime coach at Wayne State University, is presented to a faculty member who has distinguished himself or herself in the communication profession while coaching teams to competitive success at the National Debate Tournament. Ziegelmüller's son, Bill ('91), debated at Wake Forest. Al Loudon, himself a recipient of the award in 2000, presented the award.

The Ziegelmueller award is the top award presented by the National Debate Tournament, which recognizes long-term career contributions to the national debate community, akin to a lifetime achievement award ... In Ross' case, his competitive success, coupled with being widely recognized as the leading innovator for debate practice in the country, contributed to his selection.

The generational nature of academic debate lends to a sometimes fleeting institutional memory. Students and coaches pass through each year. Some influence others as a judge, others host competitions, and still fewer truly become mentors to the next generation of talented students. Ross not only thrived in each of these roles, he set a standard for others to follow. Bill Ziegelmueller's college debate partner, Mark Grant ('93, '95), expresses how Ross lives on in those he touched.

Ross's passion, intelligence, wit, willingness to challenge contemporary thinking, and kindness won't be forgotten. Ross changed the world around him for the better, in ways varying from as personal as helping troubled students to as vast as improving the quality of debates in countless places and ways. Those of us still here already miss you terribly, but beneath that, are overwhelmed by how you positively touched our lives. Coach, teacher, boss, friend, I am deeply thankful for the time you had with us.

Every person who has passed through debate in the last quarter-century has been influenced by Ross. Dallas Perkins, the Director of Debate at Harvard University described Ross as "one of the most highly respected judges in history" and "One of the greatest coaches in the history of academic debate in America has left us at a terribly young age."

At this truly sad moment we face the future and the change that will come. This will be all the more difficult because of how important Ross was in difficult times. When circumstances warranted change, Ross was not afraid to act decisively. Within weeks of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 Ross broke with traditional tournament format to provide opportunities for extended discussions of issues affecting the nation and world following the attacks during the Franklin Shirley tournament's public debate-ins. The process of making this happen was challenging and it required motivating an entire community to adjust its practices. Appropriately, Ross voiced the challenge,

Look folks, there are thousands of people who WANT TO HEAR YOU. They are calling on you to debate in a way that answers their real need for something beyond the drumbeat of the media and the administration. Will you answer their call?

For the last twenty-five years Ross answered the call with a sense of joy and energy that inspired us all. We are better for having had the pleasure of knowing him. His pioneering contributions advanced our competition practices and our activity's pedagogy single him out as a true visionary who will be dearly missed. Today we begin the difficult task of moving forward, inspired by his

legacy and answering that call. It will be very difficult to experience tournament competition without him. His influence, however, will last as long as we honor his memory.

As the representatives of intercollegiate debate organizations, we recognize Ross K. Smith's lifetime of service to our community and we express our most profound condolences to his wife Jayne, their son Alex, their entire family, Alan Loudon, the entire Wake Forest debate family, and Wake Forest University.

Brent Brossman, President – American Debate Association

Tim O'Donnell, Committee Chair – National Debate Tournament

Robert C. Rowland, Chair of the Board of Trustees, National Debate Tournament

Gordon Stables, President – Cross Examination Debate Association

~~Brent Brossman, President – American Debate Association~~