

Lee prison debaters best Texas A&M at first-ever competition behind bars

Inmates beat Aggies in 3-2 vote at George Beto Invitational Debate inside Huntsville Unit

HUNTSVILLE, TX — As they sat inside the chapel of the Huntsville “Walls” Unit prison awaiting the start of the first-ever George Beto Invitational Debate, the inmate debaters from the Lee College Huntsville Center considered the long odds they faced — incarcerated convicts with few academic credentials and limited access to news and information about the outside world, competing against the award-winning debate team from Texas A&M University.

But after both teams had laid out their cases for and against the resolution that Donald Trump’s Achilles’ heel is foreign policy, the inmates defeated the Aggies in a 3-2 decision. To Craig Caudill and Troy Thoele, who debated for Lee College, the victory was reminiscent of David’s triumph over Goliath.

“I feel like I just made parole,” Caudill joked when Lee College was announced the winner, and the entire chapel — inmates, wardens, and correctional officers, spectators, and even the students and coaches from Texas A&M — burst into enthusiastic applause.

“I’m a little overwhelmed. The level of intellect the team from Texas A&M had was amazing,” Caudill said. “Nobody expected us to win. But just because we’re in prison, it doesn’t mean we haven’t tried to change or don’t want to change. Debate has given us better cognitive thinking skills that we can use to function in a free world setting.”

For six months, the Lee College team trained as often as they could within the confines of their strict prison schedule: huddling together on the yard to sharpen their arguments, squeezing in extra practice during study hall in the unit’s education area and even facing off against coaches Adam Key and Jeremy Coffman, champion debaters themselves with nearly a dozen national titles between them.

“Eight years I’ve coached and this is about as proud as I’ve ever been,” said Key, a Texas A&M doctoral student and full-time speech instructor for the Lee College Huntsville Center who began recruiting students for the inmate debate team just one year ago. “I’ve never seen a group of debaters this motivated. They’ve picked up in a couple of months what others take years to learn.”

To ensure an even playing field for competition, neither team was given advance knowledge of the resolution to be debated. After narrowing down their topic from a list of five options, the teams were provided the same research materials and 30 minutes to prepare their cases before taking to the podium. Caudill and Thoele gathered in the back of the chapel with their teammates and coaches, scanning newspaper articles for information and bouncing ideas and potential angles around the group.

Lee College built their argument around Trump’s rise to the top of the Republican presidential ticket despite his controversial remarks, his unstable foreign policy approach that could jeopardize America’s relationships with other countries and inability to be a strong and respected leader. Michael Buse and Anthony Nguyen of Texas A&M argued that Trump’s primary weakness is actually his temperament, which has caused

him to speak and behave in a way that has alienated women and minority voters and made him less likely to accept counsel from advisers.

A panel of five judges — Hassan Assad, a professional wrestler better known by the moniker “MVP;” Jason Bay, pastor of First Baptist Church Huntsville; Dessie Cherry, a former warden and retiree from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice; Allen Hightower, a former Texas legislator; and Raymond Middleton, a volunteer chaplain at the Walls Unit — ultimately decided the inmate debaters had best proved their case.

“The ability to be an effective communicator is key to your success in life,” said Assad, who was just 16 when he was sent to prison in Florida and served more than 9 years before being released. “People are going to judge you by the fact that you’re a convicted felon, but you have the opportunity to disarm them with your words.”

Though Caudill and Thoele were the only ones to take the debate stage, both described the Lee College victory as a group effort. The help of their teammates and coaches was invaluable, and Senior Warden James Jones and Assistant Warden Matt Dobbins of the Walls Unit were instrumental in making the debate program a reality behind bars. Even their fellow inmates throughout the prison were excited about the debate and offered the team words of encouragement and best wishes, they said.

“I’m proud of everybody,” said Thoele, one of 1,200 incarcerated students pursuing associate degrees and certificates through the Lee College Huntsville Center. “The entire unit supported us. Debating and taking college classes made me a role model and an example for other guys. I hope this motivates them to do something to better themselves.”