

Huntsville Center inmate debaters top Wiley College

After beating Texas A&M last year, inmate team wins again at invitational behind bars

BAYTOWN, TX — Despite besting Texas A&M University last year in the first George Beto Invitational Debate inside the Huntsville “Walls” Unit prison, the inmate debaters from the Lee College Huntsville Center went into the second annual Beto invitational with the Great Debaters of Wiley College this month feeling just as much the underdogs.

But the judge’s ultimate 4-1 decision in favor of Lee College — which argued against the resolution that “online education detracts from the college experience” — said something else: they may be locked behind bars without access to the myriad academic and cultural resources of the free world, but these inmate debaters should not be underestimated.

To ensure an even playing field for competition, neither Lee College nor Wiley College 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.

Craig Caudill and David Mains, who debated on behalf of the Huntsville Center team, built their argument around several key points: that the college experience is subjective and means something different to every student; that online education can contribute to the college experience by helping students become more independent and responsible; that online education can make the college experience more accessible to more people; and that online education can be a valuable supplement to the traditional on-campus experience.

“It’s overwhelming; you never know how a debate is going to go,” said Caudill, who also debated for the Huntsville Center team against the Aggies. “We were a little nervous because we’re outside of our normal routine, and the topic was outside of our wheelhouse. But we went with what we had, used our passion and our heart, and with the help of our coaches we got the win.”

Unlike last year when they had only six weeks to get ready for the debate against the Aggies, the Huntsville Center debaters had a full year to practice their debate skills, polish their deliveries and embrace the lessons learned from their victory the first time around. Senior Warden James Jones also agreed to allow the debaters to spend Friday and Saturday evenings at the unit in preparation for the invitational against Wiley — and national champion coaches Adam Key and Jeremy Coffman joined the team as often as possible to serve as their opponents and offer more seasoned competition.

“Debate has gone from being an extracurricular activity to something they actually build their lives around,” said Key, who pursued Wiley College for the team’s next opponent given the institution’s pioneering history in debate.

A small, historically black college in Marshall, Texas, Wiley earned international recognition in 1930 when its team participated in the first interracial debates in history against the University of Michigan and Oklahoma City University. In 1935, Wiley debaters won the national championship against the all-white team from the

University of Southern California. Their story was chronicled in the 2007 film, "The Great Debaters," starring and directed by Denzel Washington.

"These guys are good enough that I could take them to any tournament in the world, but I can't because of who they are," Key said of the inmate debaters, likening their experience to those of Wiley debaters who were routinely denied the opportunity to compete because of their race. "In eight years of coaching, I've never been as proud of any group as I am about this one. Win or lose, that will never change."

Though they lost, both debaters from Wiley College said the experience of participating in the George Beto Invitational behind bars would stay with them for life. Freshman Rahmane Dixon said she felt honored to play a role in showing the world that inmates can acquire superior communication skills and offer something valuable to society, and senior Andre Earls even counted the debate against the Huntsville Center team among the highlights of his seven years of competition.

"This event is a representation of the power of speech and debate," Earls said. "It means so much to me because that's what debate is supposed to be: accessible to everyone. I'm cherishing the moment and I feel good for having been a part of it."