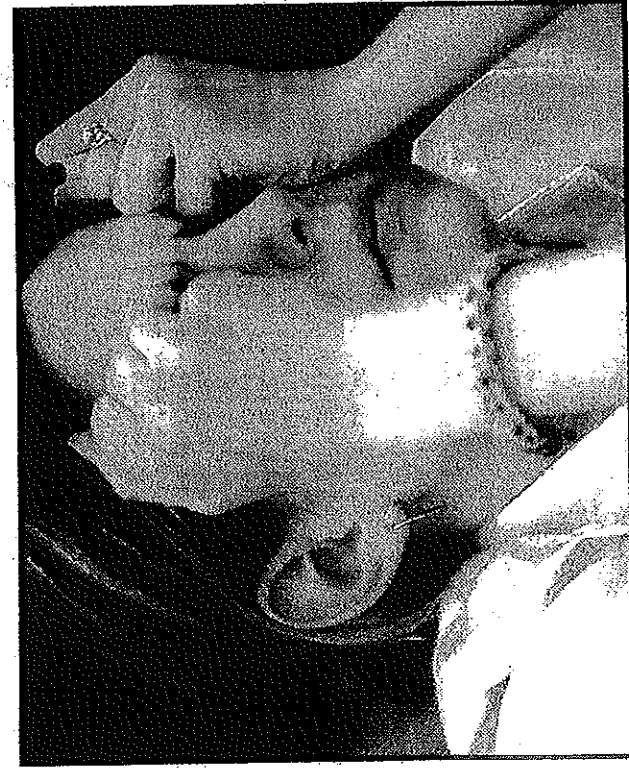


ARTS & SOCIETY

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Gathering her thoughts: Heather Thompson, 15, steels herself for the final round of a Baltimore Urban Debate League tournament.

KIM HALEYON / SUN STAFF

FINDING THEIR VOICES

Preaching and persuasion, doubt and triumph:
A year of debate in Baltimore's high schools.
By Kate Shatzkin, Page 6

IBPASI

Raising Their Voices

By KATE SHUTZMAN
GUY GRAY

The 13-year-old girl they call "Mouse" cheeks flushed the same hue as her bright pink shirt, stands before 40 pairs of staring eyes.

When they read her name — Heather Thompson, Patterson High School — she loves being half of one of the day's best teams in Baltimore's Urban Debate League.

And she hates being up here in front of everybody. She's the girl who would never raise her hand in class, then burn in the kinds of papers teachers dream of seeing. The girl her coaches had to drag into this brand-new debate program last fall in an effort to draw her out.

Now it's February, and she is in the final round of a tournament, up against some cocky boys from Northwestern High.

Just as Heather is about to speak, a boy approaches the podium and hands her a yellow Kleenex. Everybody laughs. Heather's known for crying when things get rough.

Today, though, she laughs with them. Then her words — an argument in favor of single-sex public schools — tumble out at warp speed, auctioneer-style.

"Bias-and-'is-effect-on-self-esteem-is-disastrous."
"Girls-are-more-likely-to-attempt-suicide."
As she speaks, she discreetly crumples the tissue and pushes it aside.



Gross-examination: Melissa Archer listens as Tanon Brunson of Northwestern questions her stance.

Can a year spent learning to debate change a student's life? For these Baltimore kids, there's no argument.



Testimony: Melissa Archer (seated, left) and Heather Thompson (seated, right) get encouragement from LaTanya Behnel and Tyshema Soto.

PHOTOS BY KIM HAMILTON / BSH STAFF

This is policy debate — as nerdy, and usually as private-school preppy, as it gets. It's not what you expect to find at public high schools, such as Paderson, Northwestern or Walbrook, schools that have never had their own debate programs before.

But debate caught the eye of philanthropist George Soros, the international financier whose Open Society Institute looks for ways to expand the horizons of inner-city kids. Open Society began funding leagues around the country — in New York, St. Louis, Tuscaloosa, Kansas City, Chicago and now in Baltimore, where nine city high schools fielded teams this school year.

First the students learned about debate at a two-week summer program. Then they went up against each other in monthly tournaments, held on Saturdays in their otherwise empty, cavernous schools.

Dramatic readings of "I Have a Dream" this is not. This is highly competitive debate with rules as rigid as the law, inscrutable to all except those who find it utterly fascinating.

Here's how it works: Debaters begin with a "resolution," a topic used in debate competition across the nation. This year it called for debaters to establish a plan to improve academic achievement in the nation's public secondary schools — no easy feat, as these kids know.

Before a debate judge, an "affirmative" team of two argues for a plan, perhaps creating single-sex schools or forcing students to wear uniforms. Then a two-person "negative" team attacks the proposal, trying to convince the judge that it won't solve problems and could create new ones.

Debate can get arcane. A team has to back up its case with facts and identify "harms" the plan will solve. Disadvantages, or problems raised by opponents, are "DAs" or "disads." Arguments get so twisted that a debater could end up arguing, for example, that it would be best for the environment if a war wiped out every polluting human.

The debaters learn to breathe so their sentences tumble in one breath to the judge's ears. Then they're cross-examined with attitude, one hip thrust out, rolling their eyes or, deadliest of all, being sugary-sweet, while shredding opponents with questions.

The first year of Baltimore's debate league saw its share of negatives and affirmatives: Douglass lost its coach for part of the year. Some promising debaters drifted off, and some schools barely held on to their teams.

But over the past nine months, a "preacher" named Devrin Lindsay captivated a new congregation. A pregnant girl named Brandi Weldon gave birth to her own voice.

And a Mouse named Heather roared.



Pap talks Douglass Devrin Lindsay prepares for the final round.

Waiting for a spark

The students who take up debating and stay with it have a common bond. As a group, they're neither the top performers in school nor the worst. They're the ones who have kept their teachers awake at night, the ones with a spark that hasn't caught fire.

They are kids like Brandi, a senior at Walbrook High, who learned at the beginning of the school year — after a coach cajoled her into debate — that she was pregnant. Still, she became captain of her school's debate team. And she would use the research skills she learned from debate to stay at Walbrook, showing administrators they couldn't force her to go across town to a school for expectant teens.

They're kids like Devrin Lindsay, a charismatic Frederick Douglass High School junior better known as "The Preacher." When his coach got sick in the middle of the year, he would step forward to lead his team.

And Jared Jackson, an easygoing Walbrook senior who was on the verge of signing up for the Army last summer to pay for college. A coach talked him into debate instead.

There are sassy girls like Lynnet Moore, a fast-talking, take-no-prisoners junior from Northwestern who has a wildcat, for the Northwestern Wildcats, tattooed on her right triceps.

And then there's Heather who, when the whole thing started, might have been voted "Least Likely to Debate."

She lives with her aunt near Armistead Gardens on the east side of town. JoAnn Thompson, a data entry worker,

Lynnet ends her presentation to cheers from her teammates: "You go, girl!"

Now it is Heather's turn — time to convince the judges that Lynnet's plan is unnecessary.

She takes a deep breath. Her voice is barely above a whisper.

"There is no academic achievement crisis. The U.S. is the envy of the world," she argues.

Lynnet approaches for cross-examination.

"Can you explain why the U.S. is close to the top? In your own words."

Heather is silent.

"Next question," she says. After a few more questions, Heather says: "I don't see what it does for education."

Now Lynnet has her. "But, wouldn't you want a better education?"

"Well ..."

"Wouldn't you want a better education?" says Lynnet again, running over her opponent's halting replies. From the audience comes a single "Ooooh!" — an expression of just how bad a moment it is.

"Yes," Heather finally concedes, and the Paderson team loses the round.

But there is some consolation when the day's awards are announced. At each tournament, the judges pick the best school, the 10 or 15 top two-person teams and the top 15 individual speakers.

In the latter group, Heather comes in 11th. Lynnet places 14th.

"Are you crazy?" Lynnet mutters, plodding toward the stage to accept her certificate. "I don't appreciate this."

Heather, as always, is quieter. As she passes Lynnet to receive her award, she delivers a hint of a satisfied smile.

Highs and lows

When he arrives at one tournament early in the year, Jared Jackson affixes one of those "Hello, I am ..." name-tags to one leg of his baggy jeans. In the blank he writes: MASTADABATER.

By the next month he's all business, debating in a suit to impress a college recruiter — and his mom.

That's how it is with Jared. Up and down. Moment to moment.

He'll work much of the night doing research for his team on his home computer, then take a pass on practice. He'll advance a good response to an argument, then fold under grilling from his coach. "Why am I always on the hot seat?" he'll gripe.

Jared's low point — and maybe his best moment — comes at one of the last tournaments of the year, as Walbrook is preparing a secret argument for a curriculum on the Holocaust.

They're supposed to argue that the

Holocaust was a "travesty of justice." But nobody can seem to get past the word "travesty," — a word they will likely be quizzed about in cross-examination.

"It's like tragic, right?" says one girl. Jared does much of the work on the case. But at the last practice two days before the tournament, he's nowhere to be found. Says he's got to go home. But another student finds him later, downstairs, practicing for a fashion show. It's a knife to the heart of his coach.

Skill, on the day of the tournament, Jared is the only kid from Walbrook who shows.

What happened? The fashion show happened. Strutting down the mock runway until 10 p.m., parties into the early morning hours. Some kids thought a coach was going to pick them up. Instead, they were supposed to get to Walbrook, where a bus would take them.

All Jared knows is he's here, he's ready, and in minutes he will head home without debating a single round.

But he's finally learned the meaning of that troublesome word.

"This," he says, "is a travesty."

Stepping up

Devrin Lindsay is a youth mediator at his church. When he speaks, people tend to listen. That's why they call him "the Preacher."

His talk is slick and polished. He is always to the nines every time. He dresses with a smooth word for the ladies. If you listen carefully to him delivering an argument, you'll hear what he calls his team: "The Wild Fighting Ducks of Doughlass."

It couldn't be a truer name. Halfway through the year, the class that got students — including Devrin — into debate was dropped from the schedule. Then the coach got sick and couldn't spend time after school helping the team prepare.

That's when the Preacher stepped into the breach. He and his fellow students started meeting on their own, figuring out their tactics, learning how to seize the psychological advantage. Such as when Devrin tells an opponent: "Very, very lovely dissertation," in front of the judge. Or says: "Can I say he is degrading his partner's integrity? Because his partner already explained all that."

The hardships give the Douglass kids the nerve of the underdog. At one tournament, Devrin goes up against Northwestern's feisty Lynnet Moore in the final round. He knows how to step in front of her team, subtly unspooling them even when he's supposed to be on the defensive. How to attack with both style and substance.

When they

(See Debate, Page 7f)

IDEAS:

Debaters learn how to speak up and talk back

[Debate, from Page 6E]

with, Devrin and his partner hold their trophy high. "We just decided to keep striving," the Preacher says. "And we came through."

Leading with heart

Brandi Weidon begins one tournament slumped in a corner of a classroom, clutching her belly as it tortures her with false contractions. Her baby is not due for two weeks. Apparently nobody told him.

"He is wanting to come out now," she moans. But she drags herself up for the first round of debate — and walks into a minefield.

She's assigned the negative position. But the other team is making a case nobody has ever heard. They're arguing to make high school completely voluntary. Let the good students learn, they propose. Let the teachers teach without distraction. Let the other kids make their own way.

It sounds reasonable to Brandi. She sure didn't feel like coming today.

It's been hard to show up to some of the tournaments, even though she's the Walbrook team captain. And when she does come, others aren't there. "I start even talking to you all today," she says, disgusted, to two girls who skip out of practice to baby-sit their cousin. Once she ran a practice with only two other students — only to have to miss the ensuing tournament. Another time, confined to bed, she held practice over the phone.

Now here she is, caught up



The ill of victory?
Heather Thompson beams as she shows off her trophy for fourth-place debate team.

short. She has no evidence to use against the voluntary school plan.

No statistics. Only heart and common sense and the conviction that her — a kid who from exhaustion and the piling up of life's burdens might easily have drifted away.

"Who knows if these disruptive students don't want to be there?" she tells the judge. "You never know what could be going on at home."

"Can the affirmative plan solve for the crack house? Can they solve for little Keisha having two kids at 16 years old?"

"I speak from experience. I am poor. The best place for me to go is to school."

"Some kids get tired," she concludes. "And they need that push." Her opponents counter by arguing that mandatory school attendance hasn't solved the problems Brandi raises. Kids are still on the corner, still having babies. And they win the round.

But then the judge notes the individual speakers from both teams, first to last. Next to Brandi Weidon's name, he writes the number 1.

Out of the finals

As the debate year continues, Heather makes the finals again. And she loses again.

So when the next tournament comes around, Heather and her partner Melissa Archer — another girl whose soft voice and furtive glances hide her intelligence — decide they want to avoid the finals at all costs.

Their strategy: Win two preliminary rounds, lose one. Anything that will keep them from having to stand up in front of that crowd again and risk finishing second.

"Third time's the charm," insists their coach.

Says Heather: "Not my charm." Minutes later, she's proven right.

"Omgod!" says Melissa, tearing down the hall before the round begins. "They're running Native Americans!"

Their opponents are calm and well-prepared. Their argument: Improve academic achievement by allowing Native American tribes to take over their own schools, introducing positive cultural messages

that in turn will keep kids from dropping out.

Heather and Melissa do their best to hammer away at this logic. The plan, they argue, will affect only a tiny percentage of U.S. high school students, the population targeted in the debate resolution.

But in the end, all the standard IAs in the world can't topple a well-delivered affirmative. Not even the blue paper mouse Melissa made for Heather displayed as a symbol of pride on their debate desk, can help.

When the students gather for the final round, Heather and Melissa don't place as a team or as individual speakers. This time, they can sit in the back, happily inconspicuous.

But despite her continued bashfulness, the changes in Heather — from frightened mouse to competitive debater — are hard to miss.

When Patterson coach Matt Wernsdorfer speaks to the school board at the end of the year about the debate program, it's Heather he talks about.

"She started out at Patterson as one of those little tittering girls who can barely get her head off the desk," he says.

"Now, instead of turning crimson," he tells them proudly, "she only gets slightly pink."

Best reward

The night after the final tournament of the year the league organizers play host to an awards banquet. The kids wear their finest outfits and bring the people most important to them, those they consider family. There's a proclamation

from the mayor, and trophies line the space in front of the podium.

Third and the Preacher win awards for team spirit. Heather for most improved. Brandi is named one of the 15 best individual speakers.

Then it's time for the best two-person debate teams.

Lynnet and her partner place first. They each grab hold of their tall, elaborate trophy and pretend to fight over it.

"It's like splashing a baby," Lynnet says, laughing. The cocky boys from North-

western finish second. The Preacher's team is third.

And placing fourth are Heather and Melissa.

This time, they can't hide in the back. It's the biggest audience they've ever faced. Melissa's parents are there, and Heather's aunt, JoAnn, and her cousin, and none of them can seem to stop their applause.

And as she stands to meet it, the mouse doesn't just give up a smile or push a tissue to the side. For a second that lasts forever, she beams.