



BY HOLLY J. MORRIS

April Barrett has lost her tongue ring. She has 12 hours to replace it before the hole closes. Barrett, 18, removed the stud so it wouldn't impede her delivery at the first debate of the day's tournament, at Baltimore's Forest Park High School. She and her partner, Chrystal Baylor, 17, have just faced Kia and Tia Johnson of Walbrook Uniform Services Academy, implacable twins with matching outfits and cold eyes.

It was a grueling match. Barrett and Baylor, seniors at Mergenthaler Vocational Technical High School ("Mervo" for short), doused their arguments in emotion; the twins responded with infuriating dispassion. Barrett's enormous eyes filled with pain as she argued against the use of depleted uranium bullets. Just as years will pass before she knows if the asbestos in her high school will make her sick, she argued, their effects did not manifest themselves in Bosnia until years later.

But now, the tongue ring must be found, and April runs out of the room, past a woman cradling a tiny baby. The baby's parents are competing, too.

Debate is new to districts like Baltimore, where dropout rates are high, test scores are low, and 50-plus percent of students qualify for free or reduced price lunches. The Baltimore Urban Debate League is one of 13 leagues bringing debate to inner-city high schools. In an activity historically regarded as a training ground for the old-boy network, urban debaters — predominately minority, disadvantaged, and female — are excelling, both in their own domain and against wealthier schools on the "traditional" circuit.

The contenders. Each year, more districts, schools and students join up; five leagues were created in the last two years alone, and leagues are expanding to middle schools. This fall, Washington, D.C., will join some of the nation's largest school districts, such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit. In the five years since the national movement began, roughly 12,000 students have passed through, with close to 75 percent going on to college (many to the over 60 schools that recruit from UDLs). This year, the 13 leagues funded by the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute (five smaller leagues are not) formed their own national circuit, a feat about as unheard of a starting one's own university.



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League of their own

Inner-city debate teams are on the rise, and they're bringing student achievement with them

And the National Forensics League, a high school honor society for speakers and debaters, runs the similar Barbara Jordan Youth Debates on Health.

The winners. Urban debate has also meant remarkable success in diverting at-risk kids from poverty, drugs, and violence. A student who can argue a point with words won't do so with fists, the reasoning goes. It's not just the critical thinking and research skills. Students learn to use their intellect to advocate for themselves — to use words, says Melissa Wade, a leader in the UDL movement, "in a way that would command the respect of decision makers."

Wade, who is director of debate at Emory University in Atlanta, started the first urban league in Atlanta high schools in 1985. With collaborators like then principal Larry Moss, the program was refined into what would become the model for the other leagues. For one thing, the students would do only policy debate, a rigorously structured form requiring mounds of research on dense topics like nuclear weapons policy. (It's also the smallest and most specialized branch of debate, dominated by males and prevalent at ritzier schools.)

And it took. Poor readers and trouble-makers became some of the best debaters, driven by the thrill of competition to acquire the skills they need to do the research and compose their arguments. Self-respect, then grades, improved. The urban teams began to win against private and suburban schools. When the Open Society Institute began giving grants to start leagues (New York and Chicago were the first, launching in 1997), the benefits spread as well. The first study to quantify urban debate's effectiveness is in progress now. Linda Collier, director of debate at the University of Missouri — Kansas City and of the city's UDL, will assess five leagues on various academic and personal criteria, from literacy to risk-taking behaviors.

For now, however, anecdotes will do. Darinka Maldonado, a senior at Bronx Leadership Academy and a debater for two years, tells a typical story. She lives in the Grand Concourse of the Bronx. "There are very few people around who give you an incentive to [do] things," she says. "In my area, you're not supposed to graduate from high school; you're not supposed to succeed. You're supposed to sell drugs and have babies." Debate was so all-consuming there was simply no time for trouble. She has received a full-scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, and this month she will be the first in her family to graduate from high school.

Coaches find that students take their debate skills outside the tournaments, cross-examining those who hassle them or using their "debate voice" to command cooperation. And like all debaters everywhere, they use their techniques on their parents. Reena Rani, a senior at Hostos Lincoln Academy in the South Bronx, immigrated to the United States from a small village in India when she was 12. She challenges her father's and brother's sexist statements — that she shouldn't aspire to a job because she is a woman, for example.

These aren't just the overachievers. "We're not looking



Victory Celebration after the first Baltimore Urban Debate League match of the season.

for the best or the brightest child; we're looking for the one that struggles academically," says police Officer Angelo Brooks, the coach of Baltimore's Walbrook team. His students use the tools of debate in other classes: flowing (a charting style used in policy debate), shorthand, careful listening. On average, their grades have gone up 10-15 points.

It's not a panacea, of course. Many students in the Baltimore league are still not meeting college entrance requirements — the energy and excitement doesn't necessarily travel to other classrooms, says Pam Spiliadis, the Baltimore program's coordinator. And a debate team can't salvage an entire school.

Or can it? The coaches passionately believe that you can teach anything with competition. In Seattle, for example, leaders are pushing debate and public speaking "across the curriculum," training teachers to use debate for participatory learning in classes like language arts or social studies.

Urban debate is making an impact outside of the inner city as well. "They're changing the traditional debate circuit," says Spiliadis. "They bring their own styles to it." And what style: At the Forest Park tournament, junior Regina Summers, half of the Walbrook team that wins first place, runs up to the judge, seizes his timers, and runs around the podium, all in the name of nuclear deterrence. She claps in time with her speech, stamps her feet, and slaps her thighs.

Apprehension reigns the first time an urban team debates at a suburban tournament — for many, "it's the first time they have to deal with social and racial differences that exist between the two leagues," says Spiliadis. But the anxiety rarely lasts. "They don't expect kids who come from an urban program to be any good," says LaTonya Starks, a former Chicago debater now a junior at Northwestern University. "When they find they actually have competition, it makes you feel better about yourself."

And urban debaters bring their own, new perspectives to debate. Like Barrett and Baylor's real-life asbestos argument: "We sit there, they remove the floors, and we're still in the room; they tear down the walls, we're still in the building," says Baylor. "I'm telling you, I'm suing then I get older," says Barrett, who wants to be a lawyer. She'll be a formidable foe.