

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

## Restore Houston tradition as a city of great debaters Give HISD the tools to teach this oratorical skill

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By Barbara Ann Radnofsky and  
Ronald G. Bankston

The HISD bond controversy and Denzel Washington's movie *The Great Debaters* focus this city's and the nation's attention on an aspect of Houston's history we must reclaim.

For decades, debate thrived in the Houston Independent School District, producing recognized champions. HISD schools boasted debate teams, hosted debate tournaments and produced highly successful debaters.

Barbara Jordan was a championship debater at Houston's Phyllis Wheatley High School and Texas Southern University. Old-timers still talk of her top speaker honors at Baylor's famous tournament in the 1950s, and of the Barbara Jordan-Otis King team and its tie in the much-heralded debate with Harvard held in Houston.

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Otis King went on to become Houston's first African-American city attorney. According to Barbara Jordan's biographer, Mary Beth Rogers, debate filled a major portion of Barbara Jordan's life at TSU, where she developed her speaking, research and organizational abilities. Without debate would Barbara Jordan have received the awakening, broadening, early national travel, exposure, experience and invaluable contacts that she used in her rise to the top?

You can't throw a stick at the Harris County courthouse without hitting a debater. Bankruptcy Judge Marvin Isgur was a legendary UH debater.

Dr. Phillip Zelikow, high ranking State Department and Bush administration official, and executive director of the 911 Commission, was a nationally ranked high school and college debater from Houston. "I learned, for the first time, how to research and analyze problems. Having to think harder about how government works, I discovered there were many interesting and different approaches to solving public problems. Working with other students who were smarter than me, I had to get my act together in all my high school classes (with the tragic exception of Algebra 2). And academic debate — preparing to take either side of a proposition — pushed me into the best and toughest mental workout of all: Understanding the views of the guy — or gal — on the other side."

Houston's state Rep. Sylvester Turner debated for Klein High School and the University of Houston. "From high school, to college and later as a lawyer/legislator, I have utilized what I learned as a debater to research, organize and communicate my thoughts," Turner says. "What a plus it can be to your self-esteem. It certainly was mine coming from Acres Homes."

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Now, in many urban high schools and particularly in Houston, policy debate is gone. Private and suburban public high schools are still actively involved in debate, but predominantly low-income minority students lack the opportunity.

Houston needs an Urban Debate League to bring competitive debate back to the inner city, and to involve minority and low income students. By public-private participation, we can also aid both sides in the HISD bond controversy and litigation.

Urban Debate League (UDL) structures partnerships between the urban public school district and a private partner, a local not-for-profit organization (the UDL Advisory Board) composed of civic-minded leaders in business, law, academia, government and the nonprofit community.

Atlanta, Miami, Chicago, Kansas City and Baltimore all have successful Urban Debate Leagues. Now, Dallas has stepped forward.

The programs succeed. Here's the evidence from the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues: UDLs increase literacy scores by 25 percent, improve grade-point averages by 8 percent to 10 percent, achieve high school graduation rates of nearly 100 percent and produce college matriculation rates of 71 percent to 91 percent.

We are University of Houston debater alumni seeking resurrection of urban policy debate programs in Houston.

We've pledged our service in Houston's UDL Advisory Board if the NAUDL will sanction a League. We call on Houstonians to contact NAUDL (312-427-0175, info@UrbanDebate.org and www.naudl.org) to join us.

Make Houston's legacy of *The Great Debaters* a reality. Houston and the world beyond will benefit.

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*Radnofsky and Bankston are Houston lawyers and mediators, UH alumni and debate partners of Rep. Sylvester Turner, Dr. Phillip Zelikow and bankruptcy Judge Marvin Isgur.*