Saddleback Speech Team Ends the Season in Sunny Florida!

The Saddleback Speech and Debate Team ended its formal competitive season last week at the Phi Rho Pi National Tournament which was held in Daytona Beach Florida. This competition – one of the largest of its kind – brought together community colleges from all over the country, beginning on Monday, April 9 and not ending until Saturday, April 14. Coach Shawn O'Rourke stated, “Phi Rho is the culmination of our competitive year, and I was exceptionally proud of all our students. It is a grueling marathon of a tournament but the students handled the travel, jet lag, and intense competition with the professionalism and grace that one would expect from a Saddleback student. They truly represented the school with honor.”

Coach Heidi Ochoa had this to say about nationals: “Our students grew both in skill and in character this week, evidencing that our coaching staff is still succeeding at what we set out to do each year; aid students’ scholarship, performance, and philanthropic skill!”

Returning from the tournament with two more titles to his name was Chris Russo, the team’s president, who brought home a Bronze Medal in Prose and a Gold Medal in Dramatic Interpretation. As he prepares to transfer Chris reflected on his time with the team saying, “Saddleback forensics saved my life, so it was an honor to return as team president and help train the school’s next generation of public speakers. Watching these students grow and blossom, both as performers and individuals, will be a highlight of my time as a Gaucho. I would like to thank all of our coaches for their support and guidance, as well as Professor Larry Radden for encouraging me to join the team. I could not have done it without them.”

In addition to his medals in the individual events, Chris also received a bronze medal in the team event Reader’s Theater along with first-year students Mason Knittle and Cameron Conner. Reader’s Theater is an incredibly challenging and time-consuming event that requires long practices and dedicated students. Saddleback has traditionally been one of the dominant programs in the nation in this event and this year proved no exception. Titled “Kissing Jesus,” the 25 minutes production which draws from various forms of literature to create an original performance united by a theme, this year’s show was on the opiate crisis in America and was directed by Professor Lucas Ochoa. Sadly the theater almost didn’t happen due to student changes on the team. Lucas explains, “Theater is very time consuming and we almost didn’t have the requisite three students with the availability needed to put on the show. It is essentially a play with daily practice required. Fortunately, my friend and colleague Larry Radden saved the day by recruiting a new student to from his speech class to help out and the show was saved.” He went on to state of his nationally-ranked show, “This Theater will always have a special place in the pantheon of forensics. We had to switch topics mid-season which is a challenge itself. But to switch out 2 cast members due to availability and bring aboard a student (Cameron Conner) who had no experience in speech competition and earn a bronze medal is quite a mighty feat. Placing in the top 4 is a testament to the hard work of the students and coaches at Saddleback.”

Newcomer Cameron whose joining the team saved the theater had this to say about his short time with the squad: “Making the decision to join the team has been life changing. Being the new person for anything is always nerve-wracking, but the speech and debate team accepted me the first second I walked in. After going to nationals in Florida and getting a bronze medal, I want more. It’s not about the
medals though, instead I want to make more meaningful connections with my team and other brilliant, talented minds all across the US. It has been an honor to help my team and I cannot wait for next year to meet the new talent at Saddleback.”

Nationals was also special for the coaches and students as it marked the last tournament for Professor Heidi Ochoa who ends her time with the team after almost a decade of coaching. A former Director of the squad, Heidi was instrumental with turning the team into the powerhouse that it has become along for other former coach and Director, Larry Radden. When asked about her time with the team, current Co-Director O’Rourke says, “Heidi is an amazing person who has dedicated so much of herself to this school and this team. She is an amazing coach who has changed so many lives – both those of the students and her fellow coaches. (I wouldn’t know how to dab properly had it not been for her. Inside joke.) I know I speak for all the coaches when I say it was an honor working with Heidi.”

Although the team’s competitive season is over the work is not complete. There is one more event coming up in two weeks called the PSCFA Cool-Off in which the team’s new recruits will have their first chance to experience a speech tournament. Additionally, for those interested in seeing the award-winning Reader’s Theater the speech team will be hosting an event on Monday May 7 at 5:00PM in the McKenny Theater. Tickets are 10 dollars at the door or can be purchased early for 7 dollars on the Saddlback webpage or the Box Office.

Finally, the Co-Directors wanted to thank all the people who helped make this season a success. “The team continues to thrive thanks due the continued support of the school and we want to make sure they all get the attention they deserve. We want to thank our part-time coaches Dana Jean Smith and Dawne McClure for their hard work and tireless devotion to the students. We want to thank the Fine Arts Division Secretaries, Sandra Camarena, and Joyce Speakman for all that they do to keep the team running. Sincere thanks to our Chair Kim Stankovich and our Dean Cadence Wynter for always being there for us. And thank you to the Angels of the Arts and the ASG for the for all that they do!”

The coaches finished by stating: “What until you see the exciting stuff we have planned for next year!”