

Community News

Oakland: Skyline High wins national debate championship



Skyline High School students won the Urban Debate National Championship in Chicago on April 24, marking the first win for the Bay Area Urban Debate League. Shown, from left, are: Sara Sanchez, Malachi Ambrose, Skyline High coach Christopher Scheer and Christine Harris. (Courtesy of Christopher Dilts)

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OAKLAND — Two Skyline High School students were awarded the highest honor as winners of the Urban Debate National Championship in Chicago on April 24, marking a first for the high school and the first win for the Bay Area Urban Debate League.

Seniors Christine Harris and Malachi Ambrose were unanimously given the final round win by three judges after successfully debating on the topic of foreign policy in China. The championship brought together the best debaters from urban high schools across the nation.

“It was a little surreal,” Bay Area Urban Debate League (BAUDL) coach and director Toni Nielson said. BAUDL organizes local tournaments and travel to regional and national competitions for low-income schools in the Bay Area. “We worked very hard for this, we came with exactly one goal which was win the national championship, and we all worked together.”

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The tournament brought 44 pairs of the best policy debaters in the country, representing 22 metro leagues encompassing more than 500 public schools.

Harris also took home an award as the tournament's best debater, which was another first for BAUDL. Nielson said Harris and her teammate Malachi Ambrose were favored to win the competition this year, but Harris added that debate had not always been a passion or interest.

"I joined debate freshman year at Skyline, and initially I didn't even know what debate was," Harris said. "I got put into the debate class because I didn't fill out the form to register for classes."

She said the debate teacher noticed she wasn't engaged in school, and he offered her a deal.

"He said, 'Look, if you go to a debate tournament, I'll give you extra credit,'" she said. "And that's kind of how I joined debate. And they sealed the deal with offering free food on a Saturday."

It was from there that she really found her strength as a debater.

"I think that's what's really amazing about Urban Debate Leagues in general, is that you don't have to be a certain type of person to be a good debater," she said. "What molds great debaters is great individuals, even outside of debate. It's just how to interact with other people, how to advocate for yourself, defend your opinions while understanding others."

Ambrose, who also mentors and coaches younger debaters, wanted others to know that debate wasn't just about knowing how to argue topics.

"I think debate provides a great opportunity for understanding what it means to be yourself," Ambrose said. "When I found debate, I found myself, and that's the biggest value this national championship has for new debaters."

Both are now college bound and plan to continue debating, with Harris attending UC Berkeley on a full scholarship and Ambrose attending University of Texas.

Skyline High debate coach Christopher Scheer added that it was the two students' character that led to their victory.

“The judges saw every round that Christine and Malachi don’t just speak fast and sound smart, but that there is deep integrity to their thinking, presentation and emotional commitment to the arguments they have developed,” Scheer said in a statement.

Harris and Ambrose are now in Lexington, Kentucky, for the Tournament of Champions, which will have them competing against the best private and suburban school teams in the country.

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Sarah Tan

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