

this to happen.

Technology also offers better visual support. **Bulleted lists**, a frequent source of frustration with posterboard, are very simply prepared and presented with presentation software. **Animations** are so simple to accomplish that students frequently overdo them. Automated animations provide opportunities for speakers to build intensity in a way they cannot replicate with posterboard. **Objects** may be incorporated more meaningfully, especially through digital photography, which enables students to resize, brighten, darken, or crop them for effect. The technology allows presenters to highlight, emphasize, and display objects creatively and easily. **Photographs** are often a problem in speeches, as they are rarely large or clear enough to employ with a large audience. With technology, photographs may be digitized (with a scanner) then incorporated into slides. The process is even easier with an inexpensive digital camera. **Projection** is perhaps the most obvious advantage of using this technology. Presentations may be adapted to almost any size audience or room, as images may be expanded and focused to accommodate a tremendous range of situations.

Problems

Technology is not without drawbacks. Four merit mention: coach anxiety, judge resistance, student expertise, and multiple demands. While none outweighs the advantages technology offers, each may be significant. After expending scarce funds and political capital convincing my Academic Vice President to invest in a second laptop and projector, I found **coach anxiety** concerning treatment and security of the equipment resulted in some uncomfortable moments. My students would find the preceding statement an excellent exemplar of understatement. Laptops have a higher failure rate than desktop computers, and students are not always as careful as we would like them to be. To be the type of person I wanted to be—and to help my students learn—I needed to get comfortable with the idea that equipment sometimes fails and sometimes gets damaged. It did not happen overnight, but students entering the program a year later found a much more understanding coach. Of course, when we replaced our aging equipment four years later, we spent less and acquired more reliable and more capable technology.

We did not envision **judge resistance** as a problem, but we found coaches and hired judges sometimes troublesome. Lay judges tended to appreciate what we were doing, and provided helpful comments about making presentations more effective. Those who should know event rules (Interstate Oratorical Association, National Forensic Association, American Forensic Association, Pi Kappa Delta, Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha, and Phi Rho Pi do not regulate how students may provide visual support in competitive events) sometimes ask "is this legal?" They are also likely to comment about the amount of time spent setting up and taking down the equipment—comments

my students never heard when they had problems with easels or posterboard. Those who teach public speaking are sometimes quick to quote the “rules” of presentation software, such as the number of words per line or lines per slide. As a corollary to this problem, **tournament director resistance** sometimes means students are not scheduled in rooms with projector screens or convenient electrical outlets, though such rooms are plentiful on any college campus.

While most students are comfortable with computers, some become anxious to the point of resistance. We have found that with a little training and encouragement, even students who initially resist adapting to technology embrace it. **Student expertise** takes time to develop. Even the brightest student may embrace “cool” entry and exit effects or startling typefaces or styles. They may also add sound effects. As educators, coaches should remind them that visual aids should support rather than detract from the idea under discussion.

Perhaps the most obvious problem is **multiple demands** for the equipment. At one point we had four students attempting to use two laptop/projector sets in the same events (persuasive and informative speaking.) They were double or triple entered in the conflict patterns, but they were able to work out viable schedules; however, who takes the handoff from whom at what time in what location requires a level of interpersonal trust and negotiation skill not always apparent in competitive young adults. We never felt it appropriate to ask a tournament host to schedule the speakers at different times, especially since only in Extemporaneous Speaking do rules require students to perform in the listed order.

Conclusion

This paper is written in 2008, not 1923 (generally recognized as the year of the first intercollegiate debate tournament.) Felt and flannel boards gave way to posterboard and markers about half a century ago. In the 21st century it is only fitting that we encourage our students to employ contemporary technology. More important, in an educational activity we do our students and our activity a disservice by relying on 18th century technology. Both J. Abner Pedowell (*The Sabre-Tooth Curriculum*) and John Dewey remind us that education should reflect the reality our students face. Employing laptops and projectors in competitive individual events enables our students to present their ideas more effectively as it encourages them to develop expertise in presenting ideas to 21st century audiences.

Appendix A

So what does all this equipment cost, and what does one need to begin? Below is a list of what we use at East Central University. The reader should remember that technology becomes more capable and less costly as new models replace old.

Original Item	Use	Cost	Replacement Cost
Macintosh iBook laptop computer	Prepare, store, and run presentations	\$1300	\$1000
InFocus LP280 projector	Project presentations [replacement lamp]	\$1250	\$508 [275]
RemotePoint Navigator	Remote control to advance, return, and blank slides	\$100	\$50
Samsonite Rolling Office	Transport equipment	\$100	\$50
Microsoft Office	Includes PowerPoint application	Free with university site license	\$125
Surge Protector	Protect equipment, filter power	\$20	\$20
Extension Cord	Connect to electrical outlet	\$25	\$25

REFERENCES

- Dewey, J. (1963). *Education and experience*. New York: Collier Books.
- Greenstreet, R. W. (1999). The road less traveled: Going local. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED438577.)
- Pediwell, A. J. (Benjamin, H.R.W.) 1939. *The saber-tooth curriculum, Including other lectures in the history of paleolithic education*. McGraw-Hill.



Missing

The Following is reprinted with permission from *Humanities Texas* (formerly Texas Council for the Humanities), the Texas state affiliate for the *National Endowment for the Humanities*.

Melvin B. Tolson

Editor's Note: Those who have viewed The Great Debaters know that Pi Kappa Delta is mentioned in the movie, although our historian has researched the reference it was used in and discovered that the movie producers took a little poetic license with the context in which PKD was mentioned. Mr. Ken Tolson, grandson of the late Melvin B. Tolson and President of the Melvin B. Tolson Foundation, contacted us about the possibility of reprinting these articles about Mr. Tolson. Due to an unfortunate delay in obtaining information to reprint these, we reprint them in this issue to pay tribute to Melvin B. Tolson. In some ways this is more fitting at this juncture in time, since we saw Wiley College join us for our National Tournament and Convention in Shreveport, LA in March 2009, and indeed, earn many Superior, Excellent and Honorable Mention awards.

Tolson, portrayed by Denzel Washington in the new film *The Great Debaters*, was an award-winning poet. He taught English for four decades, first at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and then at Langston University in Oklahoma. He was also a mentor to many African Americans, including James L. Farmer Jr. of Marshall (1920–1999), one of Tolson's debaters at Wiley College. Farmer, later a cofounder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998.

Wiley College's Great Debaters

BY GAIL BEIL

Excerpted from an article that originally appeared in the East Texas Historical Journal.

Having won a four-year college scholarship based on a series of Marshall Texas's Central High School oratorical contests sponsored by the black Elks Clubs, James Farmer Jr.'s ability as a public speaker was established by the time he entered Wiley College in September 1934. His cerebral father, Dr. J. Leonard Farmer, had been

GAIL K. BEIL, former instructor of history at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches and past president of the *East Texas Historical Association*, has written extensively on the civil rights movement and various aspects of East Texas history. She was a journalist for thirty years. Her work has appeared in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, the *East Texas Historical Association Journal*, the *Marshall News Messenger*, and other publications.

a Bible professor on the faculty since 1933. Although young James Farmer was only fourteen, he was recruited immediately by English professor and debate coach Melvin Tolson for the college's formidable debate team.

Enrolled in Tolson's English class, Farmer was confronted by the man he would later call provider of "the banquet of my years at Wiley College" to use his analytical mind to dig deeper, study harder, and read more widely than the average student. In class, Tolson would play devil's advocate, forcing students to defend their ideas against opposing views. And if Farmer failed to do so, Tolson said he would flunk him. He soon offered Farmer the real challenge. "Speaking of opposing views," Tolson said, "My varsity debaters come over to the house every Tuesday and Thursday evening to prepare for the inter-collegiate debate season. You come over too. Some of them, at least one, will try to make hamburger out of you—a young upstart and Dr. Farmer's son—so fight back, my boy, fight back." Thus was Farmer introduced to a skill that would serve him well the rest of his life.

Farmer had already spent two years on the Wiley campus, walking the length of it every school day on his way from the family home on the north side of the campus to high school on the south edge. He knew Tolson by reputation, certainly, and personally because Tolson and Dr. Farmer were more than college colleagues; they were friends as well.

Although it took Tolson seventeen years after he arrived at Wiley in 1923—and the threat of dismissal—to finally finish his master's degree from Columbia University, he was already considered a formidable scholar when he suggested strongly that Farmer, who was reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* "read the meat of knowledge, not just the broth." Tolson had graduated in 1923 from Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, where his debate partner was Horace Mann Bond, who became one of the nation's leading educators.

Tolson began publishing poems while in high school and had several accepted for publication by the time Farmer enrolled in his English class. A class in debate was never offered for academic credit at Wiley. It was an extracurricular activity, and Tolson coached it in addition to teaching a full load of classes. He was also the drama coach and founded the "Log Cabin Players" for town, gown, and student theater performers. His playwriting and poetic prowess caught the attention of men like poet Langston Hughes and literary critic and magazine editor V. F. Calverton. Calverton, though white, had made a career of writing about the men and women of the Harlem Renaissance and considered Tolson's creative abilities equal to those of other writers of the time.

Tolson organized a debate team in 1924, shortly after arriving at Wiley College. The college published its first yearbook in 1925 and penned in the purple prose popular at the time a description of the team and its initial accomplishments.

"Believing that the science of argumentation is the greatest instrumentation that can be used in the cultivation of mental alertness, a small group of students under the leadership of Prof. M. B. Tolson organized the Forensic Society of Wiley College October 28, 1924. . . . The activities of the organization resulted in the formation of a New Era in Wiley and brought to her campus the first inter-collegiate debate in her history. The Wiley team, which had been well coached by Prof. Tolson, received the trio from Bishop College. Clearness and force, combined with oratory, brought an overwhelming victory to the debaters of the 'Purple and White.'"

In a 1939 departmental report, Tolson described the program's achievements in its first decade:

"Wiley College initiated intercollegiate debating among Negro institutions in the Southwest. For ten years the forensic representatives of the college went undefeated, meeting debaters from Fisk, Morehouse, Virginia Union, Lincoln, Wilberforce, and Howard universities. . . . (T)he debaters also participated in the first inter-racial debate ever held in the history of the South. It was held in Oklahoma City against the University of Oklahoma City in 1930. Since that time Wiley debaters have engaged in many such contests against Michigan University, Texas Christian University, and the University of California, Southern California and New Mexico."

Teams usually had three persons. Two would debate per round; the third person the "anchor man," according to Farmer, who usually took that role. "He was the person Tolson could use on both sides of a question. He would know all the arguments on both the negative and the affirmative."

One early debater was Henrietta Bell from Houston, one of the few women on a Wiley debate team. At the invitation of Tolson, who told her he had always wanted to "try a woman," she joined the team in 1930. Her well-kept scrapbook had photos and records of all the debates in which she participated.

Unlike today's practice where the forensic fraternity Pi Kappa Delta selects one subject per year, in the 1930s there were a number of possible topics. The two coaches would agree on a subject prior to a debate, then flip a coin to see which team would begin with the affirmative side, which with the negative. For example, in 1933 debate coaches were given four questions among which to choose. Top vote getter was "Resolved: that the nations should agree to prevent the international shipment of arms and munitions." The second most popular question and one that would also have been debated in 1934-35 concerned limiting the income of the presidents of corporations. The remaining two 1933 questions considered whether comprehensive medical services should be provided at public expense, and if the federal government should provide a policy of social planning. Debaters would have needed to be prepared on all four topics.

"Our debate squad reads hundreds of magazine articles and scores

of books on government, economics, sociology, history and literature," champion debater Hobart Jarrett wrote for an article in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Crisis*. "Then we must learn to handle our knowledge with readiness and poise growing out of mastery of the platform. . . . groping for words or an error in grammar is an unpardonable sin. Sometimes our coach will put a debater on the platform during practice and cross-examine him for an hour. The debater must escape from the most perplexing dilemmas and antinomies."

Although Pi Kappa Delta dictated policies for all colleges, it was a segregated organization, a decision made by "gentleman's agreement," according to one of the PKD founders, J. Thompson Baker of Southwest College in Kansas. Baker recounted the circumstances of that decision in a 1934 history of the organization in *The Forensic*:

"One mystery grew out of the convention [of 1920] which has never been explained. . . . The question of greatest interest was over the admission of Negroes. It was argued heatedly in committee and general meeting. So evenly were the delegates divided that it was finally agreed not to write an exclusion clause into the constitution . . . but to leave it to a gentleman's agreement that no local chapter would recommend a Negro for membership. The chairman of the committee is positive that an exclusion clause was never adopted. . . . Imagine his surprise some time later to see a new set of membership blanks which specified that the applicant should not be of the African race. The writer has never learned by what right or upon whose authority this clause was inserted. Observation through a number of years has now made it an accepted practice of the society. Perhaps this Ex Curia method was the best way to settle this troublesome question."

Shut out of Pi Kappa Delta, Tolson created his own Greek-named speech and debate fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega, which served historically black colleges. By the time Henrietta Bell, called by Tolson simply "Bell," joined the five-member team, Wiley College and Tolson had garnered such a formidable reputation that he was able to schedule debates with the best black colleges and universities in the nation, institutions twice or three times the size of Wiley, which had fewer than 500 students. From Chicago to Houston, Tolson's teams could fill the largest halls available to them with paying patrons. Profits from these encounters not only paid the team's expenses, important in the midst of the Great Depression, but also added to the general revenue of the struggling institution they represented.

By the spring of 1930, when his team was ready to go on tour, Tolson decided it was time to break new ground. Somehow he managed to schedule a series of non-decision debates with law students of the University of Michigan, an all-white institution. The 1930 *Wildcat* duly noted the coup, pointing out, "It was the first time, as far as Tolson knew, [that] colored debaters met a northern university of the Anglo-Saxon race." Bell and her partner, junior Harry Hines, met the white students at Chicago's massive 7th Street Theater, the largest

black-owned hall in town, because no white-owned facility would host a racially mixed audience. Bell remembers the auditorium being so full that some of the audience had to stand. In addition to Hines and Bell, Tolson brought along Henry Heights as the anchor man alternate, in case he determined Heights to be better prepared on a subject or side than his varsity team. Heights was never used. His day in the sun would come four years later.

Michigan was not the only white team Tolson's team encountered that year. On March 21, 1930, Wiley College debated Oklahoma City University, a Methodist-affiliated college, as was Wiley. "This was the first time that white and colored students ever discussed a proposition in the South from the same platform," Tolson wrote in a column for *The Washington Tribune*. "Avery Chapel was packed with black and white citizens who came to see the signal event. When the two teams took their places on the platform, they were received with tremendous applause. The vast audience seemed to realize that history was being made." Shortly thereafter, Texas Christian University in Fort Worth invited Wiley to its campus. "Dr. True had a splendid team, and we were never received more agreeably anywhere," Tolson reflected.

By the time Farmer joined Wiley's team, Tolson was having trouble finding black colleges to debate. "[Negro] schools were afraid of debating us," reflected Benjamin Bell (no relation to Henrietta Bell) in a 1997 *American Legacy Magazine* article "Every time they did they got their pants kicked. How do you think they felt, getting spanked by a little Jim Crow School from the badlands of Texas."

A member of the 1936–39 team, Bellis also the source of the widespread rumor—now immortalized in Denzel Washington's *The Great Debaters*—that Wiley College met and beat Harvard College, with Felix Frankfurter as one of the judges. The story first appeared, with Bell's attribution, in the *American Legacy* article, and local and national media picked up the Harvard myth. But no evidence suggests a debate with Harvard ever happened. Farmer, Melvin Tolson Jr., Hamilton Boswell, Hobart Jarrett, and Henrietta Bell Wells all say the debate Benjamin Bell remembers was probably a 1937 Oxford University of England, a debate that was likely anti-climatic, since English debaters tended to entertain rather than to engage in true debate. "If dad's teams had debated Harvard, I would know it," Tolson Jr. said.

The most memorable Wiley College debate was not with Oxford (or Harvard). It was with the 1935 national champions, the Southern California Trojans, and it is the circumstances surrounding this debate that form the basis for *The Great Debaters*.

By the time the 1934 school year began, Tolson was at the top of his game as debate coach. Making his second goodwill tour, Tolson and his team of Farmer, Jarrett, and Heights scheduled a sojourn through the Southwest. Included on their extended schedule were The University of New Mexico at El Paso, the University of California

at Oakland, and San Francisco State Teachers College—5,000 miles in all. The big occasion came the night of April 2, 1935, before an audience of 2,200 at Southern California's Bovard Auditorium. The night before the debate Tolson would not let his team leave the dorm rooms where they were housed, according to the Farmer. Tolson was afraid the team would be intimidated because the speech department of the University of Southern California was bigger than the whole of Wiley College. He need not have been concerned.

Dressed in tuxedos, both teams took the stage, with Wiley on the affirmative side. The Pi Kappa Delta-sponsored question for 1934–1935 concerned the prevention of international shipment of munitions, and that was probably the subject of the Southern California encounter. "From the time Floyd C. Covington, who presided, opened the program until its close the vast audience was held in rapt attention by the scholarly presentations of both teams," described Tolson. Farmer, a freshman at the time, was an alternate and observer. His memory of the team and that night was remarkable. Hobart Jarrett, the intellectual junior from Tulsa, Oklahoma, described by Farmer as "a polished, dignified, cultivated young man wearing rimless glasses." Height's college career had its ups and downs. "He kept getting expelled for drinking," said Farmer, of Tolson's most charismatic debater. "When Heights stood up to give his rebuttal he would say, 'When I was a boy in Wichita Falls, Texas, I noticed something about those jackrabbits. The jackrabbit never runs in a straight line; he jumps from one side to another'—and then he gave a little hop. Then he turned round slowly and looked at his opponent, and the audience roared."

Using what became known as "the mighty Tolson method," the Wileyites were victorious. Tolson spent a lot of time training his debaters in the tactics and strategy of arguments. "He drilled us on every gesture, every pause," Jarrett wrote in an article for the May 1935 issue of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*. "Our debate squad reads hundreds of magazine articles and scores of books on government, economics, sociology, history and literature. We are taught to be prepared for anything."

In the audience that April night was Hamilton Boswell who had graduated from a Los Angeles high school. He was so impressed with the Wiley performance he decided to enroll at the obscure little college in Marshall. He, too, became one of Tolson's debate stars.

Tolson viewed the interracial debates, which consistently drew larger audiences than segregated ones, as a breakthrough in the troubled race relations of the country. "When the finest intellects of black youth and white youth meet, the thinking person gets the thrill of seeing beyond the racial phenomena the identity of worthy qualities." For that all too brief hour, maintained Tolson, the mixed audience seemed to forget their differences, applauding one team as readily as it applauds another. "In the South I have seen ex-slaves shaking hands with the grandsons of the masters after the

debate," he said.

Jarrett, who also took on a major role in the civil rights movement as chief negotiator with Nashville merchants following the 1960 sit-ins of Fisk students, regarded interracial debates as signal events in his college career:

"Interracial debates are a real adventure for both Negro youth and white youth. For centuries the Caucasian has believed that his superiority lies in his brain power. Debates involve a direct clash of intellects. There was a time when white colleges thought that debating against a Negro institution was mental dissipation, but that view has passed forever. Negro teams have shown that they are as capable as their white opponents despite the library handicaps that limit research. I know several instances personally in which white coaches and debaters of white universities have admitted the superiority of certain Negro debate teams."

African American teams faced one obstacle never encountered by their white counterparts. Almost every debater during this period either observed or was threatened with lynching. Jarrett's experience occurred on the way to Memphis. "The Wiley debaters are on the road and the road leads through the tremendous circle of mobsters. But there is a mulatto in the car. Coach Tolson tells him to take the steering wheel. The darker debaters [and Tolson, who had a dark complexion] get down in the car. The night is friendly, protecting. The mulatto salutes nonchalantly the grimfaced members of the mob, allaying their suspicions. And the debaters reach Memphis and read about the mob in the morning newspapers."

Boswell told of being warned of a lynching in progress in Carthage while returning to Marshall from a debate in Beaumont. At first Tolson elected to detour around the town, but later changed his mind and decided to travel straight through town with Boswell, who was fair-skinned, driving. Benjamin Bell accompanied Tolson to Ruston, Louisiana, where Tolson was to make the commencement address for a high school graduation. In it, he excoriated the audience on the implications of the lynching, the previous day of four African Americans in a nearby town. Tolson ended the speech with, "Where were you good folks when these men were lynched?" Bell said the sheriff, chief of police, and several members of the school board, all white, were in the audience. The local black residents advised Tolson and Bell to leave as quickly as possible by a back road, advice the two men followed. Farmer, relating some of those experiences to a meeting of the National Conference of Methodist Youth at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in 1936, told of a partisan debate over a motion to call on the U.S. Congress to pass an anti-lynching law. Southern delegates were opposed, citing the usual arguments supporting state's rights. Finally, Farmer said, he got the attention of the chairman, made an impassioned speech, and ended with his peroration, "Everyone here wants to stop lynching. The only question is how long do we have to wait. How long, oh Lord, how long? The pur-

pose of this motion is not to damn the South and the many decent people who live there. It is not to open old wounds, but to heal those who have scabbed over while still festering underneath. The motion seeks not to whip the South or hurt its people. The motion is to stop lynching now!" Farmer said he sat down to thunderous applause and a voice vote to pass the amendment.

The phenomenal success of Tolson's teams, who rarely lost a debate whether their opponents were black or white, was attributed to that mighty Tolson system, Farmer said. Tolson himself described it in a column he wrote for *The Washington Tribune*. "That wise old bird Emerson said there's a crack in everything God made, and I was going to find the crack in the systems of other coaches." Twice a week Tolson would gather his debaters in his living room, arguing points and practicing until late in the night. Young Melvin Jr., still in grade school, would hide behind a screen in the corner of the room and listen until he fell asleep and had to be carried to bed. "Those sessions were exciting and they were as emotional as you can get. The word tactics was always coming up. 'What are you going to do? What strategy are you going to take?'" Farmer remembered. Tolson, finding the cracks in other debater's cases, was the one plotting the debating strategy, according to Farmer. The Wiley teams simply memorized his arguments and wrote them on file cards they could pull out to meet a point made by an opponent. Tolson was so good at finding holes in the logic of others his debaters rarely had to do it on their own. "And then we had to debate Tolson in practice. He socked it to us! We socked it to him right back," Farmer said. "He'd say 'Which side do you believe in? All right, take the other side.' He did much more than polish my delivery."

Tolson said that after the debate with Southern California, he realized there was more to life than winning victories. "I had taught my boys to go after the ugly truth and let the judges and respectable audiences go hang," he wrote. "That's not so easy as you think. It endangers one's job." Tolson also taught his students that those debate skills would be useful the rest of their lives, something Farmer discovered in the late 1960s when Malcolm X's Black Power rhetoric began threatening the non-violent path to integration sought by Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr., and others. "I debated Malcolm X four times and beat him," Farmer said. "I'd think, 'Come off it Malcolm, you can't win. You didn't come up under Tolson.'"

James Farmer was only 18 when he graduated in 1938, an event he called "anticlimactic." He left Wiley when his father accepted a position teaching New Testament and Greek at Howard University in the School of Religion. Farmer said he remembered Dr. Benjamin Mays, dean of the School of Religion, arriving on the train in Marshall where his mission was to recruit the brilliant Dr. Farmer. James Farmer Jr. would study for the ministry and earn his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1941 from Howard University. When the Farmer family left the Wiley campus, they gave the family piano to the Tolsons. Less than

ten years later, Melvin Tolson was recruited to teach at Langston University in Oklahoma. By then debate was no longer a popular activity.

Dr. Melvin B. Tolson

BY ROLAND C. HAYES

I had an affinity for good literature, strongly developed by the wonderful teachers I had at H. B. Pemberton High School in Marshall, Texas. That appreciation really took off when I was a student in Dr. Melvin B. Tolson's class at Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma. It was in his class that I was taken to a higher level. T. S. Eliot, Ezra L. Pound, Robert Lee Frost, Langston Hughes, Thomas Gray, and others; in Dr. Tolson's classroom, their works ceased to be just that—works. Dr. Tolson taught with passion and made these works come alive, and for me and for a lot of his other students, he brought us into that life. I appreciated that then. I have come to appreciate it even more since.

Dr. Tolson had an effect on me whether I wanted him to or not. I did not intend to teach, but now that I have been doing it for more than forty years, I can truly say that one of the most influential people in making me the best that I can be as a teacher was Dr. Tolson.

As I remember, the first I heard about Dr. Tolson was that he taught sophomore literature and that most students had to do a repeat performance at least once for a passing grade to get out of his class. His reputation around the campus was legendary among the victims of his teaching—and he was the only teacher at that level. Like all my other classmates, I was anxious. But taking a class from Dr. Tolson was a joy. He was about 5'7," between 135 and 145 pounds, and as dynamic as a volcano. When he became engrossed in a presentation, he seemed to forget the present and become a part of what he was presenting.

He had some peculiar ways. He didn't seem to care how he dressed or looked. He would wear patterns that didn't seem to go together or shirts that were not ironed, eyeglasses tied onto his head by a shoestring. And he would make statements that didn't make sense until you slowly processed them (later to come to the conclusion that what he said made sense no other way). He was a man who marched to different drumbeat, and the more you were around him the more you

ROLAND C. HAYES is director of the African American Cultural Center and professor of history at Austin Community College in Austin. He has written on African American history for a variety of publications, including the *Handbook of Texas*, and his interview with the late Barbara Jordan is part of the *Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Oral History Collection*. He serves on the Joint Austin Independent School District and City of Austin Task Force on African American Education and Quality of Life.

wanted to get on that beat.

I have to believe in the Zeitgeist because I was raised in Marshall, Texas; Wiley College, where Dr. Tolson taught for twenty-four years, is in Marshall, Texas. Yet I had no knowledge of him. He joined the Langston University faculty in 1947. I finished high school in Marshall and entered Langston in 1959 and entered his class in 1960. Go figure.

"Melvin Tolson is the most famous Negro professor in the Southwest," wrote Langston Hughes after a visit to Texas. "Students all over that part of the world speak of him, revere him, remember him, and love him."

Dr. Tolson taught creative literature at Langston for eighteen years. The Langston drama club—The Dust Bowl Players—was his creation. My senior year, when I was ready to graduate, Dr. Tolson found me and asked me to be in one of his productions—*Lost Horizon*. As a senior, I strongly suggested I not be. I was in the production. Once he found out I was from Marshall he called me "home boy," and home boys stick together.

Langston citizens evidenced their admiration and respect for him by electing him mayor for four terms.

I am one of the many blessed students to have attended the kind of institution available to Negroes at that time to be taught by one of the GREATS at that time.

Roland C. Hayes
19 January 2008

From the Director of *Humanities Texas*:

The force of Melvin Tolson's personality was such that he left others with indelible memories. Those vivid impressions, captured in the voices of oral history more than thirty years ago, shaped my own enduring image of the brilliant teacher and poet.

Now Melvin Tolson lives again through Denzel Washington's powerful new movie, *The Great Debaters*. Although history from Hollywood inevitably interweaves fact and fiction, this film introduces theater audiences to a remarkable African American whose influence was far greater than his fame.

For Black History Month, Humanities Texas presents three online features on Melvin Tolson. In "Wiley College's Great Debaters," Marshall historian Gail Beil describes the Wiley College debate program and its triumphant 1935 team, upon which the movie was based. Roland C. Hayes, director of the African American Cultural Center at Austin Community College, shares his memories of Tolson as a professor at Langston University in "Melvin B. Tolson." The third segment, excerpts of a 1986 conversation, offers a lively portrait of

Tolson in the resonant voice of another former student, the late civil rights leader James Farmer.

What was Melvin Tolson like? Being in his presence, one of my interviewees remembered, was like being in the same room with an enormous diamond that flashed as it turned. "He just scintillated. . . . He was clever, profound, mawkish, everything." After grabbing an audience in the first thirty seconds, the source continued, "Tolson could have them roaring with laughter in five minutes, just eating out of his hand, and crying in another fifteen minutes."

Like any great teacher, Melvin Tolson used his extraordinary power not merely to inform, but also to inspire. Through withering satire and logic, he exposed the injustice of the South's racial caste system and empowered his students to challenge it. "He stretched the minds of all whose minds would be stretched," recalled James Farmer, who later founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Heman Sweatt, another former student, confided that Tolson was a "tremendous influence" in shaping his civil rights consciousness. When Sweatt filed his landmark lawsuit to desegregate the University of Texas law school, his mentor took credit for having contributed to the plaintiff's "contamination."

Other civil rights activists emerged from Tolson's classroom. W. Astor Kirk, who would recall how Tolson aroused a social pride and awakening in all of his students, applied pressure on The University of Texas's graduate school while the Sweatt litigation was underway. Hobart Jarrett, one of Tolson's star debaters, later became a central figure in the Greensboro, North Carolina Sit-ins. Zephyr Wright's student days at Wiley College in Tolson's classroom gave her, as she told me, "a different outlook on life altogether." She became a family cook rather than an activist, but her stoic dignity in the face of racial discrimination would profoundly influence her employer, Lyndon Johnson.

Tolson's students drew inspiration not only from his dynamic presence, his compelling logic, and the courageous example he provided, but also from his gift of the humanities. He introduced Farmer to Henry David Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience, the principle that later led to CORE's strategy of nonviolent direct action. In sharing this rich endowment with generations of African Americans, he gave them a vital resource with which to confront adversity.

Michael L. Gillette
February 2008

Missing

The Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta

LIBRARY RECOMMENDATION FORM

(Copy and forward to your library acquisition officer)

Name _____

Department _____

Institution _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Please enter a subscription to **The Forensic** at the subscriber rate of \$20.00 per year. Unless otherwise specified, your subscription is for a complete series, which begins July 1st of each year. At the time of subscription, you will receive all previous issues that have been published during the subscription year.

Check one:

____ One Year \$20 ____ Two Years \$40 ____ Three Years \$60

On subscriptions made outside of the United States, add \$15 per year for foreign postage.

Prices are effective through June 30, 2010

Make Checks and money orders payable to Pi Kappa Delta National

Order from your subscriptions agent or directly from:

Pi Kappa Delta National Headquarters

125 Watson Street, P.O. Box 38

Ripon, WI 54971

Other Pi Kappa Delta publications available through the National Headquarters:

The History of Pi Kappa Delta, by Larry Norton

____ copies @ \$7.50/each

The Proceedings of the 1998 Developmental Conference, Robert S. Littlefield, Ed.

____ copies @ \$5.00/each

The Proceedings of the 1995 Developmental Conference, Scott Jensen, Ed.

____ copies @ \$5.00/each

Articles from past issues of *THE FORENSIC* are available upon request.