

“Why the World Needs PKD”

Inaugural Address of PKD President

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I am deeply honored to have been chosen as this organization’s 48th President. I must admit that it comforts me to know that our organization has survived and thrived through more than a century of tremendous change. Just think about all the human history our order has witnessed: the Great Depression, two World Wars, the 1960s, the birth (and thankfully also the death) of disco, the advent of the 24 hour news cycle, the dawn of the information age, drastic changes in American and global higher education, and the rise of social media to name just a few. Amidst all this change, our order has withstood the test of time. The fact that PKD has lasted so long should lead us to ask: Why?

Although there are undoubtedly many reasons for this I think it ultimately boils down to one thing. Our order has survived and thrived because it has always had something to offer. Just consider the successful national tournament we just completed. Almost 80 schools, 1600 individual events slots, and 500 debate entries reflecting the tremendous breadth of philosophies and competitive styles from across the forensics community. All of this took place in the context of a

level three snow emergency, a fire, and most dangerous of all—daylight savings time. The students and coaches who give of themselves to engage in the competition are the very heartbeat of our order. If we've learned one thing from this weekend, it is clear that this heartbeat is strong.

Tonight, I want to propose to you a set of ideas. These ideas center around the argument that Pi Kappa Delta (here at the dawn of its second century) still has much to offer the world. Everyone here is familiar with the educational value of forensics—we've seen it, we've benefited from it, and we are still active participants in it. But tonight I invite you to think with me about how our order can help take forensics beyond the competitive realm.

First, PKD can help create a more robust socio-political discourse. Nobody who is here tonight would disagree, I think, with the idea that we live in an angry and divided global socio-political culture. Any quick perusal of the headlines, the daily and evening news shows, the faux news shows, or any social media outlet of your choice will reveal that there are lots of bad arguments out there. (And lots of videos of cats.) Sometimes I think that the abbreviation FB ought not to stand for Facebook, but fallacy book. Day after day and night after night we read and watch and listen as lobbyists, corporate message managers, political hacks, and culture

warriors all line up to spew their venom at each other. Regrettably, those few individuals and outlets that do a good job of engaging in reasoned argument are the exception, not the rule. Don't get me wrong, a free society and its media culture must include disagreement and vigorous debate. However, as most of us are already aware, what often passes for good debate in these contexts is little more than a poorly-reasoned screed designed to simply push the emotional buttons of the target audiences. Our political discourse of today generates a lot of heat, but not much light. If our media culture is any indication, we don't seem to be learning very much or engaging in any type of deep substantive argumentation.

That's the bad news. What's the good news? The good news is that we—Pi Kappa Delta—can help reverse this. We provide a forum where intelligent people can hone the knowledge and skills necessary to do more than just see through much of the poor argumentation that exists in the world, but to weigh in on those conversations and (hopefully) offer reasoned arguments and thoughtful discourse to help change the media and political culture in which we exist today. For example, I find it encouraging that some 80 students participated in discussion this weekend addressing the topic of bullying. Students in international public debate and parliamentary debate covered a host of topics dealing with some of

our most important socio-political problems. And in Lincoln Douglas debate and Public Forum debate students grappled with questions about how to deal with space and the Patriot Act. Debate involves controversy, research, organization, and marshalling evidence and arguments that should help one to make a good case, but it should also teach us other things. When I participated in speech and debate at both the high school and collegiate levels, I learned two things that have served me well throughout my life: first the value of perspective-taking and second the knowledge that I might be wrong about something. These two simple lessons would do much to improve the quality and tone of our political discourse. Given our size and the comprehensiveness of our competitive experiences, we in Pi Kappa Delta are well-poised to train students who can use what they learn here to improve things beyond the walls of the competition room. This leads me to the second thing that PKD has to offer.

PKD can serve as a model of a comprehensive community. It should not escape anyone's notice that our world is a diverse place and yet (instead of celebrating that diversity) we condemn it and employ rhetorics of division and dissociation to get as much political mileage as possible out of exploiting our differences. Many of my academic colleagues who are not a part of the forensics world often say that they feel sorry for me. They think that it must be difficult to work so closely

with people who are so passionate and so articulate. 'You all must have lots of tough arguments they say.' When they say this, I very quickly set them straight. My forensics colleagues (especially in Pi Kappa Delta) are some of the most thoughtful and inclusive people I know. It's true that sometimes we have disagreements amongst ourselves. Sometimes those disagreements do generate a little heat. Nevertheless, I would posit that my colleagues and the students who make up this organization are a model for the type of inclusive community that our world desperately needs today. I'm proud of our pedagogical and competitive balance. I'm proud that our national tournament offers students the opportunity to do everything from interviewing to Reader's Theatre to Lincoln Douglas debate. The differences among these events are vast—but enabling students to compete in such a wide spectrum of diverse events is good for them and good for the organization. I'm a firm believer in the science of neuroplasticity.

Neuroplasticity means that our synaptic pathways change and evolve over time because of how we think, process information, and respond to the forces present in our environment. Although he never used the term neuroplasticity, I'm convinced that this is what my mentor the late Dr. Bob R. Derryberry had in mind when he would talk about the educational benefits of pushing students to do a variety of individual and debate events. I think it explains why, once upon a time,

he had me compete in poetry interpretation. I'll let you in on a little secret. I wasn't all that good at it. In fact, it was terrible. My judges noticed that. So did Dr. Derryberry. That's probably why I only competed in it a couple of times. And yet, I wouldn't trade the experience of preparing and competing in that event for anything because it forced me out of my comfort zone. It forced me to use and develop different parts of my brain other than those that I used to do extemporaneous speaking and communication analysis—events I was much better at. So students, the next time your coaches ask you to do something that isn't your favorite—listen to them. You should do what they ask you to do because this activity isn't just about trophies. It's about becoming a better-rounded human being who is prepared not just to get a job, or to win a competition, but to live a life. And just in case you were wondering—no they didn't pay me to say that. Let me add that this process of comprehensive education helps to build collegiality and empathy. Do me a quick favor please. Take a look around this room. Look around at your teammates and your friends from other teams. The people sitting around you in this room come from all different walks of life. You each are different one from another in so many ways and yet you have something in common. You have all sought to better yourselves by engaging in this activity. That's a beautiful thing. And if that doesn't help you

recognize the value of being nice to one another and being just a little more accepting of each other's differences then I submit that nothing ever will. This type of comprehensiveness and inclusion is something that, if we put it into practice after our competitive days are over, will help make the world a better place. This leads me to the third thing that PKD has to offer the world.

PKD can serve as a model of organizational growth and change. Dr. Derryberry had certain things he would say. One of them was this: "we remember the past, but we don't dare live in it." We remember the past, but we don't dare live in it. What he meant was that the histories of individuals and organizations are important. They should be remembered and celebrated. And sometimes, we even have to grapple with the unsavory elements of our legacy. This is something that PKD, like any long-standing organization, has had to do. But, no matter how complicated our organizational history, it should not constrain our growth and development. One of the things I love best about Pi Kappa Delta is that it is always changing—always trying to be better than it is. In the last century PKD has changed tremendously. In the past several years we have sought to expand the footprint of intercollegiate forensics by embarking upon a partnership with the National Speech and Debate Association, encouraging the establishment of additional PKD chapters, and by seeking and promoting sponsorship for events

like public forum debate. I'm also proud to say that we have become more focused on offering students and coaches more in terms of professional development opportunities. I am really proud that so many of you did interviewing this week. Thanks for supporting that event. Not just because it's my baby or anything, but because it will be good for you that you have done it. A decade or so ago, we weren't innovating in these kinds of ways or having these kinds of conversations—at least not to this depth. But we are now. And as your President I want to invite you to participate in these conversations. The National Council seated before you is not just PKD's national council, it is your National Council and—in that spirit we want to invite you to participate with us in these discussions. [Insert communication piece here.] Now, change doesn't always come quickly. Some think that PKD should change faster, some think it should change slower. Wherever you stand on the issues and decisions that face our order today or in the future, I ask you—in fact I challenge you to work with me and each of us to make this organization the best it can be.

Finally, tonight, let me say this. I have spent the last 15 years of my life as an educator. I've spent the last seven as a speech and debate coach and I've been blessed to have led two of our organization's most successful programs Boise State University and my alma mater and my home Southwest Baptist University. I

attended my first Pi Kappa Delta nationals in 1997 and I have been hooked ever since. I love this organization. I love what it represents. Most of all, I love its people. When you come right down to it, I think that's the thing that makes PKD so special—the people of this organization. When I'm coaching I often tell my students that they should be the best versions of themselves. I think that idea sums up quite nicely what my vision is for the future of PKD. An organization that honors its people, always seeks to offer more to its members, and tries (in all things) to be the best version of itself. If we all commit to doing this, we will help this organization contribute to the world at this important time in human history. Thank you and I wish you all the best as you continue to practice “the art of persuasion beautiful and just.”