

## Episode 427: NCFCA with Kim Cromer

### Episode Transcript

**Kim Cromer:** When you go to a tournament, you actually see the impact that these young people can have, and it's in every area of life.

**Julie Walker:** Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

**Julie Walker:** So it has been stated, I don't know how true this is, that the number one fear that people have is the fear of public speaking. Have you heard that before, Andrew?

**Andrew Pudewa:** I've heard it from people who are selling public speaking courses. But yes, it evidently ranks very high on the general fears that people carry around. There's kind of people fall into two categories. People who like to stand in front of other people and talk and people who dread it.

**Julie Walker:** But I do think, and I think you would agree with me, that that fear can be overcome.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Absolutely.

**Julie Walker:** So were you always, because you obviously fall into the camp of "get me in front of a big group of people as much as possible" were you ever nervous doing public speaking?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Not necessarily nervous about the idea of it. And I chalk that up to having performed musical instruments as a young child, playing the violin, going to recitals and all that. I did take a public speaking class in high school. I don't remember anything about it, but, it wasn't a negative. When I did my first public lecture to people who were paying money to listen, I only had to do 10 minutes of a whole session.

And I was nervous not about the people, I was nervous about my boss who was going to give me very specific feedback on my presentation. So I prepared really intensely for those 10 minutes. And that was a good thing. And then of course, over the years it gets easier and easier. And now I don't necessarily get nervous, but sometimes I get curious. What am I actually going to say?

**Julie Walker:** You don't know until you open your mouth and out spew the words. I have had that nervousness. I remember the first time we did a podcast together, episode one, which we blew up, by the way, that is no longer available. Well, we are in the high four hundreds now. And so we have, it's just a kindness to our listeners. We have eliminated the earlier ones so that people don't feel like they have to start at the very beginning. But trust me when I say, dear listener, you don't want to hear that first one because I was very scripted. And just over the weeks and months and now years, I've become much more comfortable.

So yeah, it could be a little nerve wracking.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, but like anything, the more you do it, the easier it becomes, and it's true with everything, and oftentimes the hurdle is just getting started. Like, how do I actually start preparing to speak in front of a group of peers or an audience?

**Julie Walker:** Right. And we teach this in all of our writing courses in the first of our nine units.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Webster was very clear when he put the whole thing together, he didn't actually want it to be called a writing program. He wanted people to think of it as a written and oral communication program. So in his world, that was essential from the very beginning.

**Julie Walker:** And so over the years, as this idea of public speaking grew, you and your own children were involved in competitive speech and debate, and you developed a course called *Speech Boot Camp*. And it was for your own students.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes. We were in California, and I had been doing it for five, six years. We started a club. We were with the National Christian Forensics and Communication Association, NCFCA, we became an affiliate, and there were a lot of clubs in California, lots of tournaments, lots to do there. And we really didn't know what we were doing, but we got the book on how to do policy debate.

And I knew a little bit about public speaking. I had done a year of Toastmasters training when I was younger, so I brought in some of some of my notes from that. So we did. And the club basically doubled every year. We started with four, then we had eight, then we had 16, then we had 30-some. And it got to the point where I wanted to give people kind of an opportunity to get a sense of what it might be like to be in the club and do competitive speech and debate.

So I created a summer course. I called it *Speech Boot Camp*. And it was four classes in two weeks in August. And that kind of became a prerequisite, not an absolute, but a unofficial prerequisite that if you wanted to join our debate club, then you would do this speech boot camp with Andrew Pudewa.

Well, in 2009, we moved to Oklahoma. And everyone's saying, but who's going to do speech bootcamp? And I thought, well, let's make a video. I've got equipment, I can do it. It'll be a product we can sell and y'all can have it and use it for as long as you want to. So that was how the original *Speech Boot Camp* product came into being, which was, what can I do in four short classes that will get people.

At least interested, if not excited, about joining our homeschool speech and debate club. And so we sold that for 15 years.

**Julie Walker:** At least, yeah, at least 10. And of course, we have now discontinued that product

**Andrew Pudewa:** We have because-

**Julie Walker:** Now we have a 12-week course, *Introduction to Public Speaking*, and we do things like teaching students how to memorize, which is very important when you're learning how to do speeches, self introductory speech, a narrative expository, persuasive, we even at the end do some impromptu speaking, impromptu speeches. And really, there's a secret

agenda here, maybe not so secret, because you talk about it in week 12. And that is: now, what do you do with all this knowledge? You should join a speech club and participate in competitive speech and debate. How about NCFCA?

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's like going from kind of a basic army style boot camp into the Rangers, right? The Navy SEALs of speech because that is by far the best organization with the best training and the best culture. It is the best thing happening in the world of communications training for young people today.

**Julie Walker:** Well, we really should get someone who's, I don't know, someone in charge of the whole thing.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Wouldn't it be awesome if we could get our friend Kim Cromer to come on the podcast? Hi, Kim.

**Kim Cromer:** Hello, Andrew and Julie.

**Julie Walker:** We love you so much, Kim. You're an amazing woman, and you are doing such a good work.

**Kim Cromer:** Aw, thank you so much. Thank you for having me today. Andrew and I have been running parallel with speech and debate for a while, but it's always a blessing to be alongside you guys.

**Julie Walker:** Yeah. So I was at nationals last summer when it was in Minnesota, which is where I was born and raised. And so I was happy to have an excuse to go home and visit the folks, but to witness firsthand the finalists who are either giving speeches, which is what I participated in as far as a judge, and the debate tournament. Oh my goodness. So so incredible the work that these students— teens, high school, teenagers— are doing and Andrew you're going to be there this year.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I am. I'm very much looking forward to it. I've never had any of my kids or students make it to nationals, so I never have had a real good excuse to go. But this time, I don't have any students anymore, and my kids are, my grandchildren are not old enough. But I am looking so forward to being there and, of course, meeting probably a lot of parents that I have intersected with at one point or another in the past decade.

And I always say, if you're feeling a little low, on hope for the future of the world, which is basically my condition all day, every day. But if you're in kind of a funk, like things are just not going well whatever, socially, politically, economically, and you need a shot of pure energy to give you hope, pure hope, you just get yourself to a speech and debate tournament. And you will see young people operating just at the peak of human potential, almost, doing things at 16, 17, 18 years old that I could never do and have never done and would never be able to do. And you think, yes, these are the young people, these are the ones who are going to meet the qualifications for leadership, which is a good person who speaks well. And that goes, of course, all the way back to Aristotle. So, I guess my quick question for you, Kim, is, How did this culture come to be, and how have you maintained it over the years? How is it that this homeschool speech and debate world is just so extraordinarily beautiful and inspiring?

**Kim Cromer:** It's true, Andrew. It really is. And the credit goes to those early folks, Mike Farris and his daughter, Christy Scheib, who saw the need, especially for homeschool students when it first started, for homeschool students to have an opportunity to build their public speaking skills through competitive speech and debate.

And over the years, it's just continued to grow and thrive. And I really believe the answer to your question about why it's been able to continue in the way that it has is pretty unique, in the world. And it's because we have such a constructive community. We are a community of like-minded believers who band together on that core principle of: there's an important call on all of our lives that we can be ambassadors, that we can be good civil servants, we can be good neighbors, we can be whatever it is that's necessary because we can be effective communicators.

And it's just been a really great opportunity to continue to pour in because as you said, when you go to a tournament, you can think this sounds like a great idea just by hearing about it, but when you go to a tournament, you actually see the impact that these young people can have. And it's in every area of life. I think some people, and maybe even me in the beginning thought, well, most of these kids are going to be attorneys or politicians or maybe even a pastor. But the truth is they're out now. We have almost two and a half decades of alumni who are impacting the world in all kinds of places for good. So it's just encouraging.

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's also exciting to see how many of them make really lifelong friendships. They maintain connection and sometimes they even marry each other.

**Kim Cromer:** It is true.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We have a couple, we have two couples here in Eastern Oklahoma that were debate partners in high school and are now married with kids. And it's very, very exciting to see. I always tell people that in most social situations, and you put kids together, especially teenagers, they tend to sink down to the lowest common level of attitude or vocabulary or content or emotional world. They just kind of sink down. It's like if you want to have friends, you got to come down to their level because you can't really expect them to be different than they are. And that's frustrating for parents too, like a church youth group, it's just, sometimes it's just not a net good, but an NCFCA tournament is almost the opposite.

It is so amazing because everyone there is striving to be their best, and the younger students are wanting to be like the older students in terms of how good they are and the quality of their content and the quality of their heart that they put into it, the level of work and excellence, the refinement of presentation skills, and their kindness towards each other.

And then the older students, they know they have this responsibility to be a model, to be something worthy of striving for. And I cannot think of any other environment where you can put teenagers and have that be true, which is, I think the greatest blessing of being part of it, let alone the skills, the experience, the friendships, the potential spouses, what, all that stuff.

But it's this, everyone is just striving to be the best they can be. And that is, I think, what really gives hope to me, when I go there and. I don't have kids in, but I've tried to find an excuse to go and, and help out and judge at a tournament or two, a couple times a year for the past many years, and it's the same, it's the same goodness that I remember when I was in the thick of it, volunteering and working and being there three days nonstop and driving half a

day or a whole day to go. How is this possible that this very, very high striving for excellence, spiritual, intellectual, even dressing well?

**Julie Walker:** Oh my goodness, Andrew, I have to insert this. One of the things that just blew my mind and it's so, it's such a non sequitur, the dressing, the girls, they had the killer shoes. Like I'm like, I wish I could have shoes like that. Now sometimes they'd be carrying them because you probably couldn't actually walk in those red stiletto heels, but wow, do these kids know how to dress?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah, so I guess, what's the trick of creating that everyone's striving to be the best and no one's sinking down? That's the magic of the culture, and I think if you could bottle that up and sell it, you could become truly wealthy.

**Kim Cromer:** It's true, Andrew. I really feel like it's, as you said, putting them in this competitive environment where iron can sharpen iron really does pull them up rather than pull them down. The competitors, even as they're competing with one another, are learning, and of course they're young people, who are really learning though, to value their opponent as a person and to be able to debate ideas rather than debating people.

**Julie Walker:** Wow.

**Kim Cromer:** And that would be unique in our society if we could bottle that and sell it.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I have my favorite book of the year for 2023. It was called *How to Think Like Shakespeare* by Scott Newstock. We had him on the podcast. Brilliant, brilliant book. And one of the things that was very distinct about that Renaissance education of Shakespeare's time was discourse and that there was this formal training in getting together and listening to an argument and then responding to the argument and have someone listen to your response and then make a response to that and then responding to that in this kind of structured, very civilized way. Something we don't see on TV or presidential debates much anymore, but that idea of honing the mind through discourse as a key to kind of a restoration of culture. The idea that it was the recovery of the humanities and the liberal arts in the Renaissance era that brought in all of the amazing achievement, the literary achievement, the cultural achievements, the artistic and scientific achievements.

And so I was thinking about that and then thinking about, oh, I get to go and be at NCFCA nationals and how there's such a connection between what you are doing there-and all the parents and all the kids, not just you, but you and the grandsons of everyone involved- what's happening there and really the potential for a restoration of discourse in the public forum—a la—a renaissance, could we have a renaissance in our world if we could have a renaissance in our education? And I would view this culture of speech and debate as being so critical on that. And it's not something that kids pick up on instantly. It has to be modeled and practiced.

What are some of the ways that you see these clubs?-- and for people who don't know, if you live somewhere, if it's a decent sized city, there's probably an NCFCA affiliated club somewhere near you. If there isn't, you can actually start one, which is a little harder, especially if you don't know what you're doing, like me, the first time. But you, you get in a club, and, and so you have these people who, some of them kind of know what they're doing, and some of them kind of don't. And then they go to the first tournament. And then they learn more, and then they come back and work a little more. And somehow they learn this art of discourse. What

do you think are some of the major contributing factors to that achievement? And I would call it an achievement in the real sense of the word.

**Kim Cromer:** Right. I agree with you, Andrew. I think it is the camaraderie. It is the coming alongside that is unique in our world that allows these young people to see, as you said, the older ones kind of instructing the younger ones and allowing them to increase their confidence, really to gain some poise, encouragement, certainly the idea that they have a place to be heard, and they are able to really share the things that they're passionate about.

And I think just inherently, that encourages them. They often come home from the tournaments, as you very well know, and they read their ballots. They read the feedback from the adults who have taken time out of their life to give them constructive feedback, to say, "These are the things that you did great. And I was a little confused by this particular point." And I think just inherently that bolsters their confidence that does sort of turn that flywheel that you're referring to: of being able to build that skill. I mean, it might seem even a little bit contradictory that competition would encourage them, but it really is that dangling carrot that drives the skill build. And so coming, receiving feedback, practicing, as you referenced at the beginning of getting used to doing that sort of thing, but then being encouraged and seeing there are adults who are taking this very seriously and pouring time in and energy and taking the opportunity to give me feedback that can make me a better communicator.

And so I think it does just continue to build that opportunity to. Increase the ability to have positive discourse. And it's really, I mean, you would remember it's not just in the competition rounds, it's actually between rounds when they're having conversations in the hangout space that really does, I think that fellowship and that camaraderie does also contribute to that.

**Julie Walker:** So, Andrew, you started talking about the small clubs in the cities, and then they have local tournaments. How does a student get from Atascadero, California, which is where your first club was, all the way to Nationals?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, that,

**Julie Walker:** Can anyone go to Nationals?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, that's, that's more a question for Kim. The structure is in regions. And so each region is kind of governing itself in terms of tournaments. And then I think there are some national invitational tournaments that may be outside your region, and you could travel and compete in those tournaments.

I don't know, how do you get to nationals? What's the requirement there?

**Julie Walker:** Well, you could be Andrew Pudewa and be invited to speak at Nationals.

**Andrew Pudewa:** That's only way I would get there, but how do you know if you qualify for nationals?

**Kim Cromer:** That's a great question. And the kids ask that often because they certainly want to go to their regional championship or to the national championship. We have a very well-developed qualification system that does allow competitors from each tournament to progress in the different levels of competition.

So if you advance to elimination rounds, which is typically about the top 50 percent, if you advance to the elimination rounds at any tournament, you qualify to your regional championship. And we have 12 regions all over the country. And each of those championships sends a significant number. So it's usually about 25 percent of the students who are there receive some type of invitation to the national championship.

So we have 4000 or so students who are competing around the country right now, still in our regular seasonal competition, and we will narrow that down to the national championship where we'll have just over 500 competitors. So it's pretty steep in terms of advancing all the way to the national championship, but it's still a really good opportunity for kids to be able to walk through different levels of competition.

And as you said, to mix with one another, it is true, we have national opens, and national mixers where you can come from any region to any area. We try to put them in places that are exciting like Phoenix, Arizona, in January, because those of us who live in the north, really are excited about going to Arizona in January. So that's how they qualify.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And of course, some kids may compete in one single event, like policy debate, or Lincoln-Douglas debate, but then some kids would compete in speech events, and I think you can do several of those at a time. And some kids will do the whole thing, the grand slam, they'll do a debate event and several speech events, and then they may qualify in one or more of those events for nationals.

I want to just go back to something that occurred to me. You were talking about how the students are grateful for the input of the adults who are giving their time. And I always thought that was quite remarkable. Every single time you would judge anybody for anything, they would always, without fail, in a very sincere way, not perfunctory at all, but in a very sincere and real way, say to the judge or judges, "Thank you for judging." And I juxtapose that against kind of the motto of young people running around in the world saying, "don't judge me, don't judge my clothes, don't judge the way I talk, don't judge my music, don't judge anything about me, don't judge lest you be judged," and they have this very, very narrow concept. And here you go to a tournament and the motto is, "Thank you for judging me. Please judge me. I'm grateful." To me, that is like the biggest difference you can see there in the culture. And I just wanted to mention that cause it occurred to me.

And so we see the opportunities here. If someone wants to get involved with NCFCA, that's the website, right? [ncfca.org](http://ncfca.org) and you've got regions and clubs are listed and people can ask for contacts in their areas. I think the best way to do it is just go to a tournament and meet people and see what it's like. And then decide if you want to go to the next step or not.

We have obviously worked together on some projects in the past to create some education materials that are specific and applicable to NCFCA Speech and Debate, which has some particular technical guidelines to doing it. But we're also hoping to get more people just on the runway toward that without the frightening aspect of it being too overwhelming, too complex. So we here like the idea of EZ+1. So just getting your foot in the pool, so to speak, what, what do you find is a great way for people to do that without being overwhelmed?

**Kim Cromer:** Andrew, I think one of the best ways for folks to get involved and see if they really think this is something they'd like to participate in is summer events. The clubs that you referenced, many of them, and they are independent clubs. There are about 160 around the

country. And most of them host some sort of camp in the summer. It can be one day or a couple of days. We do some online camps in summer and those run for one or two days about some of the specific subjects that we're going to offer. And I feel like that's really just the best way that if you're going to talk about dipping your toe in and to really see what it would be like to participate. That's really one of the best ways.

**Julie Walker:** So, I think another thing that we need to mention, Andrew, because this podcast is actually being released just days before you are going to be in South Carolina. And we have a lot of listeners who live in in the eastern seaboard area, and they can actually just jump in a car.

So South Carolina. So Kim, tell us a little bit about nationals and what kind of speech events you're going to have Andrew speak at Nationals.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Fortunately, I'm not being judged.

**Julie Walker:** He's not being judged. This is true. No ballots will be issued for his talk, but what I love about this, Andrew, is they can kind of get their toe in the water in both ways. They can hear you speak, but then they can actually attend some of the student competitions. Right, Kim? Is this open that people can.

**Kim Cromer:** Absolutely. Absolutely is. We've encouraged people to come and watch. We'd also encourage them to come and be part of our judging pool. One of the things that is unique about us is that we, because our goal is real life communication, we invite judges from the community, whether they have experience or no experience, to come and participate.

So on the website you can sign up to judge a round and then come and hear Andrew speak. He's going to speak three times. We are super excited about that and share your *Preparing for Persecution* presentation. I think it's something a lot of families need to see and think about and pray through. So we'll be super excited about that.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I might actually be nervous if I'm speaking to a whole auditorium full of pros, but I'm grateful for the opportunity.

**Julie Walker:** Andrew is speaking June 2nd and 3rd. And of course, as our custom, we'll put links in the show notes for everything that we've referenced.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And we'll have some materials there for display. And of course our product, I know you're chomping at the bit to let everyone

**Julie Walker:** Introduction to Public Speaking

**Andrew Pudewa:** We took Speech Boot Camp, discontinued it, replaced it with a infinitely superior product. Instead of four classes, it's 12. We just get to go into everything in more depth. And we've only been selling this what about a year. And I already have been at a few conventions this year and have parents and kids walking up to me saying, "Hey, we did your speech, your *Introduction to Public Speaking*. And it went great. We did it with our little co-op or we did it in our family with a couple other families.

And, and, oh, my daughter, she really didn't want to do it. And by the end of 12 weeks, she wants to know if she can do more. And that's how you know, okay, we've got a successful product here because it's changing the attitude, the heart, the willingness. So we will, we'll



have that there. It's not a formal speech and debate training course at all. And you've got that, NCFCA has that. So this is exactly what it says, *Introduction to Public Speaking*. So hopefully people will come and take a look at that, or they can actually get some, some free lessons online,

**Julie Walker:** Exactly. Go to you'll love this URL, Andrew. I don't even know if you know this. [IEW.com/free-speech](http://IEW.com/free-speech).

**Andrew Pudewa:** free-speech. Oh yeah. What a revolutionary idea. So people could try it out even before then.

**Julie Walker:** Right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Anything else you would love to let our listeners know, Kim, about NCFCA, or your experience, or why this is the best thing going on in the world today?

**Kim Cromer:** I think it is, Andrew, and I think that is the linchpin is it gives the opportunity for young people to really build the skills that they're going to take with them in their life to be effective wherever the Lord is going to call them wherever they're going to be planted. This is going to change the trajectory of how they think about communication. We hear that testimony on a regular basis that this has changed my child's thought processes about where they're going to go in life. So we're just super excited again to encourage people to come and see it. We do have some online opportunities with the podcast coming out a little bit later before nationals.

It'll be into next season, but there's always online opportunities to go and see it if you can't make it to South Carolina, but we certainly want to encourage you. You will see the cream of the crop there in terms of our competitors, and you get to hear Andrew speak, and that's always a treat for our families.

Of course, they love to see him come and judge, too. They're a little intimidated. So Andrew, you don't need to worry about being intimidated, but they are intimidated when you come.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, it's as close to a little taste of heaven as we can get on earth. I would put it that way. And so I will second that, encourage you. I think coming to a live tournament is going to be magnitudes better of an experience than an online thing, which is a far second best. So if you can possibly get to a tournament, if not this year, then next year when it starts up again.

**Julie Walker:** I want to end with an invitation, Kim. Could you please invite your speech winners to be guests on our podcast? Wouldn't that be fun to have a handful of them and we'll just plan to, I've already marked it on our little calendar here. I think it would be really awesome for our listeners who were not able to make it to Anderson, South Carolina, to at least get a taste of what they missed in June.

**Kim Cromer:** Absolutely. Julie, that's a great idea. And our young people would love to do that.

**Julie Walker:** Great. We'll plan on it then. Well, thank you, Kim, for being a part of our work here at IEW and specifically for joining us today on this

**Andrew Pudewa:** And I will see you very soon.

**Kim Cromer:** It's coming right up. So yes, we're very excited. Thank you both for having me and we'll be excited to see you in person.

**Julie Walker:** Thank you, Kim.

**Julie Walker:** Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at [IEW.com/podcast](http://IEW.com/podcast). Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.