

Podcast 459: Speech and Debate with Christy Shipe

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: , I always say to families that I talk to at conventions, if you're ever feeling a little short on hope for the future of the world, go to an NCFCA tournament because it will change your whole perspective on what's possible.

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: Andrew, I know you have been a huge fan of the work at NCFCA for years.

Andrew Pudewa: Two decades, actually. It's frightening to me, but

Julie Walker: and two years ago, just two years ago, I had the opportunity to go to the nationals in St. Paul, Minnesota, and saw for the first time the quality of these teens coming through the NCFCA program. And wow, I am just as big a fan, maybe not just as big.

So I'm really looking forward to going to St. Paul again this year because they alternate where they do the final. And actually Minnesota is where I grew up and so I get to go back and visit relatives as well. But I am really looking forward to seeing these kids and just watching the quality of their work because they are working really hard.

And we are so privileged today to have one of the founders of the NCFCA here as a guest on our podcast.

So welcome, Christy Shipe.

Christy Shipe: Thank you. I'm so excited to be here today.

Andrew Pudewa: Your name was first brought into my world when in 2002 or 2003, I'm not a hundred percent sure, we in our little group in the central coast of California said we want to do speech and debate, but there wasn't a club in existence anywhere closer than 90 miles from where we lived. And this other homeschool mom and I talked about it and said, Well, I guess we just have to start a club,

Christy Shipe: hmm.

Andrew Pudewa: But we didn't know anything about it. And of course, YouTube wasn't what it is then. So you couldn't just kind of go to YouTube and watch debate rounds or watch

individual events. speeches, and we got your guide to policy debate. That's what it was, I think.

Christy Shipe: That's right.

Andrew Pudewa: And she and I started reading this thing, and everything was foreign. What's a 1AC? Didn't know anything. And so we had four kids, two of her kids, one of mine, and another teenager. And we just got together, and we read this thing, and we did it, and then we went to a tournament. Lost every single round,

Christy Shipe: Oh,

Andrew Pudewa: Absolutely complete nothing, but we came back, despite the defeat, we came back very inspired and not just the adults, but the kids were also very inspired.

Now we know what we're trying to do. We see this now. And so we practiced some more, went to another tournament. One of our teams won one round and we came back and thought, okay, that's progress. And I think we did a total of three tournaments in California that first year.

The next year, our club doubled in size. We had nine kids, and we got a debate camp. And we sent some of our, six or seven of these kids went to a debate camp, and that was a phenomenal shot in the arm. I mean, that was a really great benefit because they came back and really could coach everybody. And here's how we did it. And the adults were just learning along with the kids, sometimes not even as quickly as they do.

And then the next year, our club doubled again. We had over 20 and in '09, when I left California, that club had over 30 kids, and that was kind of the end of my time with my older kids. And I just look back on those moments that driving to tournaments. And that's when they would be staying up till midnight to finish the round. And it was pretty crazy. But I learned so much, the kids made lifelong friendships. They were just honing and refining and polishing skills and motivated in a way I had never seen teenagers that motivated ever before in any context, it was off the charts level, independent motivation, striving, desire. And I know this is not special, but it was really special for me. Only I've started to see that happen now all over the country.

And I hear those same stories from other parents. I just want to commend you and all the other teams that work to establish NCFCA, because it is one of the great, great things in education and in the homeschool world in particular. So that's my introduction.

Tell us though a little bit more about yourself. You have a very, very awesome father who's relatively famous, and you have a lot of siblings, and you got involved in this whole thing. So give us a little history on that and then how old your kids are and what they're doing.

Christy Shipe: Sure. So I'm the oldest of 10 children of Mike and Vicki Farris. So Mike Farris, who founded HSLDA, he's an attorney, he's fought for homeschool rights for decades

now. And we were on kind of the cutting edge of homeschooling when my parents started homeschooling me. Let's see. I think it was 1982.

So I've been around the homeschool world for a long, long time. And then I have five children, and most of them are adults, if you can believe that. So I have four adult children and one still in high school. And I have a grandson and a granddaughter on the way. So two of my oldest daughters are both married and it's my oldest daughter who's has the little boy and is expecting a little girl. So, growing family.

Andrew Pudewa: You can certainly become a member of the “looks way too young to actually be a grandparent” club. I was a member of this club for a short time until I looked in the mirror one day and said, no, I actually do look old enough to be a grandparent, but you certainly still qualify.

How did the whole idea for NCFCA come into being? How was it that your dad and you and whoever else was involved said, Hey, let's start a homeschool speech and debate league?

Julie Walker: Well, and can I ask another question related to that? What does NCFCA actually stand for?

Christy Shipe: Yes,

Andrew Pudewa: Not the smoothest acronym in the world, but

Christy Shipe: is not the smoothest acronym in the world and we've taken to recently calling ourselves NCFCA Christian Speech and Debate because that captures what we do a little bit better, but the acronym stands for National Christian Forensics and Communications Association. Forensics can be a confusing word, but that has to do with our speech events, not CSI investigations. So that's what the acronym stands for.

How it got started was, like I mentioned, I was homeschooled since the early 80s. And as I was growing up, my dad is a lawyer. And so I come by the debate gene pretty naturally. And we had lots of family debates and such. But my dad realized the opportunities that he had in public high school, I didn't have as a homeschool student. And so when I went to college, he encouraged me to join the debate team at college, which I did and loved it and competed during all of my college years.

And it was while I was at college that my dad said This activity, just like what you were saying earlier, Andrew, when you really see it, when you get into the event, when you get involved in it, you realize, wow, this is a fantastic activity. And he was really the one who originally had the vision for bringing it to homeschool students. Let's not make our young people wait until college to get this opportunity. We want to bring it to high school. And even now, NCFCA has events all the way down to age 7. So we've got a junior's program for ages 7 to 11, and then our senior's program from ages 12 to 18.

And so he kind of forced me to start it while I was still, I was a junior in college, and I came home for Christmas break. And he said, we've got to start this debate league for homeschool students. And I'm like, yeah, right, dad. Because he had so many ideas for starting organizations, I can't even tell you.

He would, like, want to start an organization every couple of weeks. So, all of us would kind of roll our eyes, like, yeah, okay, we're going to start a debate league. Right, dad. Okay. But he said, you cannot go to this New Year's Eve party that I was about to go to. You cannot go to the party until you write up the plan for this league and the rules and how we're gonna run it. So, I wrote it all down and the rest is history.

Andrew Pudewa: Now, were you doing speech and debate in college yourself?

Christy Shipe: I was. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay. So you were intimately in that world. And so translating that into something that homeschool moms could learn about was probably a challenge, but you were well-qualified and experienced. What were some of the challenges in the early years in terms of getting the word out and/or getting people trained and/or...

Julie Walker: helping parents to help their children overcome, "I will never be standing up in front of anyone, Mom, you cannot pay me enough money to do that" fear of public speaking.

Christy Shipe: I think really the biggest challenge, honestly, was what you described, Andrew, was explosive growth. So, as soon as we got the word out, once people saw their students debating and other, first you see somebody else's students debating usually, but once we showed that to the homeschool leaders across the country, and because we started the league through HSLDA, we had access to all those state leadership organizations, and we staged a debate for them, for the leaders of all those organizations. And once they saw it, it was very easy to spread the word, and it started to grow explosively. So some of our early challenges was just the growing pains of, honestly, we didn't have space. We didn't have space at our tournaments to accept everybody who wanted to come and so we had to create more opportunities for competition, create more levels for competition so that our tournaments weren't just closing out and not able to accept everyone.

It is that kind of activity that, just what you said in your experience, Andrew. I just try to get people to come to a tournament, even as a viewer, just come, bring your kids and come watch the tournament and see what it's like. Because once you come and see it, I feel like it sells itself. Then you're so excited. That's the story over and over. Once people come, they see it, they experience it, they join.

Andrew Pudewa: I always say to families that I talk to at conventions, and wherever I am, if you're ever feeling a little short on hope for the future of the world, just get yourself to a tournament, go to an NCFCA tournament, whatever it takes. It's worth the time. It's worth the expense because it will change your whole perspective on what's possible.

And, I think a lot of us will say, Oh, that's a remarkable kid who's done a remarkable thing, but that's remarkable, that's unusual. You go to a tournament, you see a whole campus full, and you think, this is not impossible. If this many people can do this at this level. And then you watch the kids who are in their third or fourth year, and you just think, wow, the cumulative effect of practicing this year after year after year, the level of sharp thinking and accurate speaking and high quality research and joy they have.

Another thing, and I'd like you to comment a little bit on how you worked to build this into the NCFCA culture. But I always kind of say, this is like the ultimate youth group. It, in fact, it's almost the anti-youth group. It's the "be an adult" group. Church youth groups, there's better, there's worse. But what oftentimes we find is kids kind of sink down to the lowest common level of attitude, dress, behavior, conversation. But at a tournament, it's the opposite. They're not sinking to the lowest level. They're imitating and emulating up the, the younger kids want to be like the older kids 'cause they win rounds. And so there's this really the most positive sort of peer influence that I see anywhere in the world of teenagers. And if anything, that's, that's almost a greater achievement than the technical argumentation skills.

But how did you do that? Was it with some intentionality? Was it just because all the parents were really good parents? And then as it grew, how did you maintain that culture? Because it's there to this day, even perhaps better than it was when I first encountered it 20 years ago.

Christy Shipe: I agree. I do think the culture has improved over time. Not that it was bad to start with, but I see the same trajectory. And I would say it comes back to our mission, which is "to challenge and equip ambassadors for Christ to communicate truth with integrity and grace." So we intentionally emphasize the mission just constantly. It starts with the board of directors, which I currently sit on. And then it goes to every level of the organization, all of our staff, all of our volunteers. It's critical that we keep the focus that we're equipping these young people with skills to be ambassadors for Christ, not to be self serving, not ultimately to get a great job or argue in front of the Supreme Court and become president of the United States or whatever, take over America, you know.

That's not the goal. The goal is to train ambassadors for Christ who are going to use their skills for the kingdom and for the glory of God. And when you keep the heart for the Lord, like we really just have to focus on that all the time, every day of a tournament. we start with a devotion and prayer.

All of our staff meetings, we start with prayer. All of our board meetings, we start in prayer. There's a lot of prayer, and there's a lot of focus on the Lord because it's very easy to slip off into pride. These kids learn a lot of amazing skills, and they become well trained and very articulate, and it's very easy to become prideful and self serving.

So we focus them in on this is for the Lord, and we want you to communicate truth, not brashly and harshly and hitting people in the face with it, but with integrity and grace. And I think that's the spirit you're seeing. We take a lot of time to emphasize gracious

communication. Debate itself encourages you to listen to an opponent and debate something graciously, so all of that just works together to create kids that they're excited to serve the Lord. They love each other. We emphasize that a lot—love for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. And we're doing this for the Lord.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, this grace and integrity, it's so beautiful when you see it being pictured. And so many times over the last couple decades, I've thought, couldn't we have like an NCFCA for political candidates that we have to suffer listening to who lack the grace. They lack the integrity, they lack the humility that is so profoundly attractive at a soul level. And once in a while you see someone, but usually the media kind of suppresses that. It's such a refreshing thing in the world today to see.

I would like you to tell, if you have any stories of kids you knew that were really reluctant to get involved, and yet, they did. Two, three, four, ten years later, what was the result? Because I think a lot of parents would be responding, Oh, my child's too shy. Or my kid says he hates the idea of public speaking. Or I just don't know how we would fit this in. He's so busy doing his pile of textbooks.

That's another thing that I have had to try and help people get over, which is, well, you do have only a certain amount of time. Why is this worth that time and why is it worth maybe giving up something else that looks important but isn't going to be as long term valuable? So, there's a few questions you can run with.

Christy Shipe: Okay, sure. I mean, yes, I think it's worth it because there's no other activity I know that trains as many skills at the same time. It really is the most efficient activity I know to train your students in research, writing, communication of all types, including of course verbal, listening, asking and answering questions, just every kind of analytical and communication skill you can think of along with incredible research skills like this is.

In fact, I also teach debate and speech to homeschool co-ops, online, things like that. And my students consistently come back and say, learning speech and debate was the best thing I did to prepare for college. It really intensely prepares them for research papers, any kind of presentation they would need to do, just logical thinking, and being able to have conversation with people—all of those skills packed into one activity.

Julie Walker: And I think that's so important to speak to today's homeschooling parents, because we're so afraid that we're going to miss something, and we're not going to check all the boxes for college and career readiness. But this is just one big box. It's called, do this.

Andrew Pudewa: I observed that when kids go really deep into something, even if it's some ridiculous thing that you're not really gonna need all that information later in life, I remember the first year that we were debating was the resolution was that medical malpractice law in the United States should be significantly reformed.

And here we are learning all this obscure, obscure stuff that 99.999999% of Americans would never even touch. And these kids are knowing it and learning it and using evidence and arguing back and forth. And what I thought is, well, they're actually studying all their subjects here because to go deep into one thing, you're learning the history of it. You're learning the economics of it. You're learning the grammar and vocabulary of it. You're learning the law and politics of it. So by going deep into one thing, you're actually getting all those subjects in a way. Have you found that as well?

Christy Shipe: Yes, absolutely. I think it could easily be counted as an English credit, that's a no brainer, a civics credit, social studies, government, economics, and then whatever the particular subject is, that could count for another course too. Like we're doing foreign policy this year towards Central America. So you might throw in a world history credit because you're studying, deeply studying the history of Central America and the history between the United States and that region. And like you said, a deep dive into a subject, it hits so many other disciplines all at once. I found the kids to come out very robustly educated.

Andrew Pudewa: And the information dissipates over time. The “having learned how to learn it,” that's the skill. And I think every parent, if you said, what's your top list of things you want your kids to leave home with? How to learn how to learn, to know how to learn independently and be motivated in that way. That's got to be high up on most everyone's list. And this seems to do exactly that.

Christy Shipe: And just as a life skill, to understand how to navigate the information age that we're living in, to understand how to read and analyze material, how to evaluate the trustworthiness of a source, how to, of course, navigate the internet and all the information that's out there, that skill alone is so useful for the rest of these students' lives.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and things have changed a lot in 20, 25 years in terms of how kids get information and where their research and evidence comes from. And I'm sure you on the board and the leadership have been talking a lot about that, especially in the last couple of years with AI popping up and in some cases giving some very, very specious information, the kids don't necessarily have the maturity or life experience to question that.

I'd be curious to know in your in the education side of NCFCA, how are you coaching kids to deal with the new wave, if you will, of internet-based AI-delivered information?

Christy Shipe: Well, yes, we're coaching them to go back to original sources. Some AIs, such as Google, at least gives you links of where it's pulling its information from. And you always want to go back to primary sources as much as possible. So AI is the definition of not a primary source.

So we say you can get some ideas. It's good for brainstorming. It's good for getting some ideas, but then you've got to go track down primary sources. Where did that originate? Where did that come from?

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, you asked Christy a really great question that I want to be sure we get to because we're running out of time. Alumni success stories?

Andrew Pudewa: Do you have any, any stories of kids who, particularly the ones that weren't very enthusiastic in the beginning?

Christy Shipe: Yes. So I would say most kids absolutely love it and even get what I would maybe call addicted to this activity, but there are some. One of the students that I'm thinking of is my son, who hated public speaking, but I forced him to do it. I was just like, this is what we do. It is your speech class. Consider it your speech class credit. And you're just going to go up there and do it. And he did. And he did a great job. He did it for two years. He's an athlete. He now is playing division one football for college. And I said, aren't you glad you had your training so you can do interviews and talk to coaches and things like that, because he's still pretty shy. But he is grateful that I forced him to do at least two years of speech and debate to just get those skills honed and get him a little bit more comfortable in public speaking situations.

But it doesn't mean every kid is going to just love it to death and then another one of my children. She also was very reluctant, in fact, she cried through her first tournament and she was so stressed and I said, You know what, you tried it; you were stressed; let's take a break. And then when she got a little older, she tried it when she was 14 and was stressful. And then when she got, when she turned 16, she said, Mom, I want to try it again. And just that little bit more of maturity was what she needed. She just needed some time to mature and grow. And then she really blossomed. She was dealing with some social anxiety already. And NCFCA Speech and Debate was the place where she felt safe and comfortable to experiment with that, having conversations with different kinds of people and getting up in front of people and speaking, and that really helped her blossom. And now she has a job in communications.

And I know another young man who had some learning disabilities. He had trouble just putting together a sentence. And his family said, you know what, let's do speech so you can help exercise this skill and get more and more comfortable. And he did it. And by the end of his time with NCFCA, he was able to graduate from high school and give the toast at his friend's wedding, which was like a huge achievement for him. He never could have gotten up in front of people and done a speech like that, but he was able to do it because he practiced through our speech events.

Andrew Pudewa: You're saying weddings reminds me of two things. One is I have been to a number of weddings in the last seven, eight years, and I am often wishing particularly the best man. He seems to be the worst. The girls do better, but these, these guys, they, we need to create like a special course on how to give a wedding speech, but it's probably too little too late.

Julie Walker: Well, I do need to mention, we have a course, *Introduction to Public Speaking*, and we do touch on that a little bit, Andrew, where you can have great conversations with the groom ahead of time and then..

Andrew Pudewa: The other thing I wanted to mention though is that the culture of the debate, the speech and debate club, the tournament, the social environment allows kids to connect, not just being in the same place physically, but they connect intellectually in a way that is very rare in the general social world of teenagers. And because there's such an emphasis on the Christian component and the character and spiritual side, they connect that way as well. And I know that you know that any number of married couples have come out of speech and debate clubs.

And we have an interesting situation. I don't think you ever met these kids, but we started a little club. When we moved from California in '09. There was no speech club. There was no debate club anywhere in Oklahoma when we got here. So, we started a club. We had, I don't know, 14 kids. We brought in a coach to do a little camp and give everyone a running start, and we ran this thing for several years. Well, there were two brothers that were in this club, three brothers actually, and then there were two sisters from a different family that were in this club. They ended up being debate partners, and then they ended up both getting married, and so the two brothers married their debate partners, who were two sisters, and they still live around here, and now they're having kids, and it's just really exciting. So I'm not saying, join a speech and debate club so your kids can find a good spouse, but that might be a possible side benefit, you never know.

Christy Shipe: That's right. And I was just thinking something you said earlier, Andrew, is that we don't often expect enough of our young people and teens. And I think that's what NCFCA does so well because, like I said, our mission is to challenge and equip these young people as ambassadors for Christ. And when these students are challenged with this level of activity, they rise to meet the challenge. And they're with, like you said, they're socializing with all these other young people that are rising to that challenge that are iron sharpening iron one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. And it just creates such a dynamic and positive, encouraging social environment for these teens.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I think we could go on forever. I just love talking with you. I will be excited when we do next meet in person. I will be excited to hear where you go, what, what other things you may end up doing now that your youngest is coming into the end of homeschooling.

Julie Walker: So I have two quick questions before we say goodbye. One is, is it true that NCFCA isn't just for homeschoolers anymore?

Andrew Pudewa: Good question.

Christy Shipe: That's true, yes. It's for anyone who can sign our statement of faith and our statements of foundational beliefs that we have about marriage, gender, and sexuality, and the

Bible as the inerrant word of God, and the Nicene Creed. So anyone who can sign on with those statements is welcome to have their children compete in NCFCA.

Andrew Pudewa: Which is important because the whole definition of homeschooling has changed with hybrid schools, pod schools, cottage schools, online stuff, so that's great.

Julie Walker: Well, and the second question is, Christy, can we invite your champions to come and be guests on our podcasts for the future?

Christy Shipe: Sure, absolutely.

Julie Walker: I think it would be really fun for our listeners to hear firsthand what is possible.

Andrew Pudewa: It would be.

Christy Shipe: That's right. Absolutely. That would be great. And just to say, this is a skill that is learned. Every kid, when you see the amazing champion, the person who wins nationals, they're a normal high school student. This is achievable and possible for the average high school student. It really is.

Julie Walker: Well, I've seen that firsthand as a judge in some of those regional competitions, and I just think this debater is very young, and they're still learning. And I can see that they're really trying to, they're playing with those tools, Andrew, that we talked about in *Introduction to Public Speaking*, the speaker's triangle.

And you can just tell it's pretty forced and awkward. And then you get to nationals, and wow, they're in a different level.

Andrew Pudewa: Fluency. You touched on a thing, we don't have time, but I would say, for parents wanting to get involved. Going to a tournament, and, and go ahead and sign up to be a judge. You don't need any experience, they have an orientation, and what I really like is the NCFCA's approach to judging is, well, these kids need to be prepared to speak to anyone. Not just people who know about debate, not just people have experience in league competition. So when you go to the tournament to restore your hope in the future, o moms and dads out there, just jump in and volunteer to be a judge and you will serve the kids, serve that community, learn a little bit more about the whole thing by engaging at that little higher level. And of course, they're always looking for judges. So you can serve and help out in that way.

Christy Shipe: That's right. And I'll say you can do that by going to our website, www.ncfca.org.

Julie Walker: And hopefully we've said that often enough that you've got those letters on the tip of your tongue, tip of your brain.

Andrew Pudewa: ncfca.org and look for your region, look for tournaments, sign up to be a judge, and hopefully I will see some of our listeners out there. If I see you at a debate

tournament, I want you to come up and say, I heard your podcast with Christy Shipe and that's why I'm here.

Julie Walker: That's why I'm here. Well, Christy, it's a pleasure. And Andrew and I will both be there in St. Paul, Minnesota, in June. And we look forward to seeing you there too. Thank you.

Christy Shipe: Wonderful. I look forward to seeing you. Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: God bless you.

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. 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.