

Podcast 514: Confident Public Speaking with NCFCA Champions

Episode Transcript

Jonathan Paul: My parents didn't really want there to be a lot of arguing and bickering, but they did want a sense of wanting to think critically about ideas and have good discussions. A debate isn't really just about winning a debate, but rather to figure out what's true.

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, Andrew, have you heard the term strategic partnership?

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, it sounds like something an MBA would talk about.

Julie Walker: Well, it has to do with being known by the company you keep and you want to hang out with the cool kids, so that way you'll be considered cool too.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, now we're mixing metaphors.

Julie Walker: We are. Yes, we are. But we are good friends with the folks at the NCFCA, which is a speech and debate organization, and we've talked about them many times on our podcast. We've had Kim Kromer on talking about it, and we had Christie Shipe who wrote some curriculum and who is involved very much in NCFCA.

Andrew Pudewa: Well she launched it basically. Yeah.

Julie Walker: With the help of her father.

Andrew Pudewa: as a teenager.

Julie Walker: I do not think I knew that, but her dad is with HSDLA which is another strategic alliance that we have. He used to run HSLDA.

Andrew Pudewa: He's done many, many other things, but I think it's important for you to tell everyone what NCFCA stands for, lest they be in mystery.

Julie Walker: well, I'm gonna toss that right back at you after I say this. You can tell when someone has been. On this homeschooling journey for a while when they can say things like HSLDA or NCFCA without stumbling over the words, but I don't know exactly what all those letters stand for, Andrew. So please tell us what NCFCA stands for.

Andrew Pudewa: National Christian Forensics and Communications Association

Julie Walker: There you go. Much easier to say NCFCA. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: What's forensics? Most people think that's what you get on a TV show where the detectives figure out which bullet killed the guy or something like that. But forensics is essentially the art of evidence. So speech and debate includes having evidence.

Julie Walker: Yes. So you and I were at NCFCA Nationals last June, and we also did a podcast there. You could we'll put a link in the show notes where we just were talking in front of a group of parents and teens and answering questions, and it was actually really delightful, and I think we had to put that into two sections because it got a little long. But that's okay. We had things to say and questions to answer, and it was just a great time. But. Here's the exciting thing: here we are now almost exactly six months later, and we are interviewing some of the champions of that national speech tournament. So we have with us Jonathan, Pierce, and Abby on our podcast, and they're gonna tell us all about their experience.

So welcome.

Pierce Stanton: Thank you so much.

Abigail Fagot: Thank you so much.

Jonathan Paul: Thanks so much for having us. This is gonna be fun.

Andrew Pudewa: So dear Debaters, dear Competitors, I think everyone is kind of interested to know. How did you get involved in speech and debate? Was it voluntary? Was it volun-told? Were you inspired by another student? Because everyone has kind of a different story there. And then what was your level of reluctance and/or enthusiasm the first year? And kind of briefly, what was your pathway to nationals? Jonathan, why'd you go first?

Jonathan Paul: So I think my journey to starting speech and debate is probably a little bit abnormal. My dad actually first heard about the NCFCA in 2008, I believe, which also just so happens to be the year I was born. So it was kind of something I always knew about. I'm the youngest of five children in my family, so all of my older siblings did it from the time that my oldest sister was 12 years old, which is the minimum age you have to be to compete in the normal competitions within NCFCA.

So I grew up knowing about it. If you go back and watch home videos from my family, I'll be talking about speech and debate as like a three or 4-year-old. So I was always really excited to start it. It wasn't something that was forced upon me in any way. I was waiting till my 12th birthday. It was probably one of my most exciting birthdays because I knew that was the year I could start speech and debate.

And so now as I go into senior year, this will be my sixth year competing in speech and debate. And I've competed in almost all of the categories. And so my path to Nationals this year was pretty much just going to various qualifying tournaments early in the season. And then the way it works is if you do well enough in those tournaments, you can make it to the

regional level competition, which is just a couple of states competing at that. And then if you do well enough at that, you can qualify to the national tournament.

Andrew Pudewa: So you, you were in a family of debaters. Did you have good debates around the dinner table? Did you grow up in kind of a forensics mode of family discourse?

Jonathan Paul: It's a great question. It's hard to imagine living in a different family. So it was kind of just normal to me that we would talk about things and we would discuss through things. But I think something that my parents were always big on and why they wanted us to do speech and debate was that there's a big difference between debate and simply arguing.

So I would say that our, my parents didn't really want there to be a lot of arguing and bickering and quarreling in that way, but they did want, and I think they did garner in all of us children, a sense of wanting to think critically about ideas and have good discussions while also being open-minded. And the debate isn't really just about winning a debate, but rather trying to figure out what's true. So I think, yeah, that was pretty common in my family growing up.

Andrew Pudewa: That's such a great attitude to have because so many people think about winning an argument as if that was going to accomplish anything in the world. But using the skills of rhetoric to pursue truth, that really is what we would hope everyone is seeking out of the experience. Sounds like you have very wise parents, and being the youngest in a family often gives you an advantage. I can think of several famous people who were the youngest in their family that are famous because they were extremely good at what they did. So there's that trickle down effect. So I'm sure you're very grateful to your siblings who probably helped you all along the way and gave you that, that little edge that many people maybe have a harder time finding.

Jonathan Paul: Yes, that is very true.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, Abby, how did you get involved in competitive speech and debate?

Abigail Fagot: Yeah, so I'm the youngest of seven, and I like to say that I grew up in NCFCA because my oldest brother Daniel, who's 16 years older than me, did it at the age of 16. So I was in my mom's sling at all of the tournaments. I was very excited at first when I did juniors and stuff, and then we took a break, and I came back my freshman year and I didn't really look forward to it. I was terrified of debate, and my mom had a rule for all of my siblings that we have to do debate for two years and speech as well. And I was thrilled about speech, but I was not so excited about debate. And I remember specifically crying every time we had to go to club, because I was like, I don't wanna do debate, mom. I don't understand why you're making me do this. But I am so glad that she made me. I thoroughly enjoy it now, but it definitely took me some time to get used to it. And kind of like what Jonathan was saying, my mom and my dad have always instilled that in me as well, that we have to debate gracefully and be effective communicators for Christ.

So I think that was a very important thing in my family, and I'm very glad that they did that for me. And this is my fourth year competing, so I've had three under my belt. I'm excited to go into my last season, and it's been a very exciting journey. My way to nationals, my path was similar to Jonathan's. I went to a bunch of qualifiers and then went to regionals, and then from there the select few out of regionals went to nationals. So yeah, it was a very fun experience.

Andrew Pudewa: And you competed in impromptu. Can you give a very short description of what that is for our listeners?

Abigail Fagot: Yeah, of course. Impromptu is the category where you walk in the room and you pick a topic card that has two topics on it, and you're given two minutes to come up with a five minute speech.

Andrew Pudewa: And do you write little notes? Can you use little notes or you have to kind think in your head and hold it in your head and then talk for five minutes?

Abigail Fagot: Yeah, so what I like to do is I walk in the room with a note card. You're not allowed to bring that up with you, but I just write down my three main points because I tend to like run through all of my ideas and sometimes I'll forget what my first point was. So I'll write it down and then I'll look over them before I stand up and give the speech.

And another really helpful thing that I found in prepping for impromptu is I have an impromptu journal. And so I just write down fun stories that go with common themes that you'll find in your topics. And like fun, historical moments, books, personal stories, political, and anything. Sometimes I've written movie scenes that I think I could use, and that's really helpful and I'll look at that in the hallway before walking in the round.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, I love it. You've probably heard the term “commonplace book.” If not, it's kind of popular in the classical ed world where you do keep kind of a list of things you hear, things you read, things you experience that could be useful later on. And I've many times encouraged parents to encourage their students to do that, so I'm glad to hear how helpful that was for you. What other events did you compete in other than impromptu?

Abigail Fagot: I competed in Duo Biblical-apologetics and Open last year,

Andrew Pudewa: So, no Lincoln Douglas, or policy debate.

Abigail Fagot: and LD as well. Sorry.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, and LD as well. So that's a busy schedule of things to be prepared for. One more question I think people have is: there are many people who have been told or got the impression or believe that if you get involved with speech and debate, it will eat up all your time, and then you won't have time for other really important stuff like biology or math or history.

How would you respond to that?

Abbagail Fagot: Yeah, I do have the habit of overcommitting myself a little bit, but NCFCFA has helped me a lot with time management, so I'm actually able to work and do theater and school and NCFCFA all at once. And so it's very helpful to learn how to time manage and like when to write your speeches and it up all your time.

I like to have days where I focus on one speech and that's really helpful so that way I can just knock it out and then move on from that speech.

Julie Walker: Abby, if you would've, if we would had to have our cameras on, you would've seen both Andrew and me give each other a shocked expression. Oh, you did theater. Oh, you did work. Oh my goodness. So, and time management. I love that you shared that because I think that's a skill that is sometimes lost in high school education. How do you manage all these projects?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Well maybe you can write a book on that at some point. Let's move on. Pierce, give us a little bit of your story and experience.

Pierce Stanton: Well, my time as a speaker, I would say had a very rough start. At about 10 years old, I was tasked with giving my first public speech, which was a memorized poem that I gave with my sister. Needless to say it didn't go well. It ended in tears, in me running off the platform. So I kind of always knew in the back of my mind that speaking was something I needed to get better at. And thankfully, a few years later, when I was about 14 or 15, a friend of mine introduced me to the world of NCFCFA speech and debate, and that kind of started the journey through the organization. During my time in NCFCFA, I competed for four years in platform speeches, limited prep, and debate, and I've since graduated, so I guess that would make me kind of the adult in the room, metaphorically speaking.

But my journey in persuasive specifically kind of started off with a problem. I saw this great speech category, which was designed to be persuasive to kind of be, in a sense, controversial, to persuade someone of an idea. And I saw a lot of speakers using it to inspire, to educate, to encourage. But rarely were they actually trying to convince me of something I wasn't already convinced of. And so I kind of took the speech platform and decided to go a different route with it and try to persuade people. And that was the incentive behind the speech I gave this last year. So overall, NCFCFA has helped me to be able to speak better and have fun while doing it.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, now everybody wants to know what was the speech subject or topic that you chose to actually try and persuade and could have been controversial.

Pierce Stanton: So my speech topic this year was on why individuals should get a flip phone. That on its face is kind of controversial because a lot of people like their smartphones. They don't really want to switch to a phone that can't do all the benefits and the things that a

smartphone can. So that topic was one that people got a kick out of, but it was also in my mind, also controversial.

Andrew Pudewa: I wish I'd heard it. I'm sure everybody wants to know. Do you use a flip phone rather than a smartphone or both? Or neither. How did you, how did this research affect your own life?

Pierce Stanton: I actually do use a flip phone, which has probably been one of the most interesting decisions in my life. Just the amount of conversations, the amount of shock that people give me that I actually do have a flip phone is quite astounding, but specifically using a flip phone can simplify your life quite a lot. You aren't attached to your phone to technology as much as if you did have a smartphone. So I found that to be the main benefit, which is why I use one.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, hopefully you won't get a job where your boss demands that you have one so they can get a hold of you 24/7.

So for all three of you, another question would be: other than the improvement in speaking skills, which Pierce mentioned, and memory, I'm sure that all of you have had to develop various memory powers, memory tricks, memory techniques, what other kind of intangible benefits have you experienced from your time with NCFCA and competitive speech and debate? Jonathan, you can go first.

Jonathan Paul: Yeah, I can go ahead. I think apologetics comes to mind because that's the event that I had the honor of winning this past year. All of just preparing for apologetics is an intangible benefit. I think, being a Christian, in the world we live in today or just throughout history, requires a certain level of skill with apologetics to fulfill the great commission, to just defend your faith with grace and with truth.

So I think even if I prepared for apologetics for three years and never succeeded at all at a tournament, the knowledge that I gained through doing that and the skills just through speaking, but also just spending time in God's word, preparing for these speeches—there's 96 questions total that you have to prepare for in order to be prepared for anything that you could be asked in a tournament. I think that is an intangible benefit that goes far beyond anything else really, that I've gained from speech and debate.

Andrew Pudewa: I love it. I have often sat in judging or watching apologetics rounds, and I just think, wow, that's phenomenal fluency with probably the most important ideas, at least in my imagination, and I don't even come close. How would I ever be as smart as this 15-year-old kid? Actually, I think that in almost all the events, especially at Nationals. But I love how you said even if you never won, it would've been so worth it.

Abby, how about you? Some kind of less-than-obvious, intangible benefit of competing.

Abigail Fagot: Yeah, and CCA has really helped with my identity in Christ. And just knowing that, 'cause it's not about the medals that you win, it's about the heart and why we're really doing this. It's to be effective communicators for Him. And that's something that I've learned just through like gracefully losing and winning as well. Just knowing that it doesn't matter whether I win or lose and that my identity is in Him. And another really cool perk with NCSA that I found was my sophomore year, I did a duo with my brother who was a senior and he's my brother. Like I didn't really get along with him that well. And duo really helped us just become so much closer as friends.

And I realized that he was actually kind of cool, and it helped us achieve a common goal. By working together to achieve that, we really connected. And it also is super, a really cool opportunity with NCFCA to just really grow deep friendships because you are with a lot of like-minded people, and you're here not to win, but to point back to God and give him the glory. And so I have made some very long lasting friendships in NCFCA.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, that's beautiful. I'm not going to ask any of you, but I am going to mention to our listeners, I personally know four couples who were speech and debate partners who then after a period of time following their high school years, married each other. So I'm not saying that's an intangible. Actually. It's very tangible, but it's not something you should go searching for, but it does happen, and I'll bet that some of you will know some people to whom that happened as well.

Pierce, how about for you, intangible benefits, something on the less than obvious side that you got out of your experience?

Pierce Stanton: I think my time in NCFCA taught me two things. First of all, there's nothing, no problem, no situation that we can face that's too small to pray about. Often things come up in speech, whether it's a conflict in time or just personal situations because you're dealing with people and often prayer has been the only way out of those situations for me. So that's something I've taken away. But secondly, time management skills has been a huge asset now that I'm in college. And I think the start of that kind of came from NCFCA where you're juggling multiple speeches with mere minutes in between rounds. And knowing how to manage those minutes to fit your schedule has been a huge asset now that I've graduated from NCFCA.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, that is so beautiful that you said no thing is too small to pray about. That is a fantastic lesson. I wish I could. I would've learned that many decades before I did. One last thing I would like to mention is some people have, I'd say, an unfortunate experience when they connect with speech and debate that, oh no, these kids are all kind of stuck up and prideful and they think they're so good and I don't want my child to fall into that trap of pride.

My experience is that those of you who make it to the higher levels of competition at nationals, or even placing or winning, somehow have avoided that to a degree greater perhaps than other people. It seems to be almost a prerequisite for reaching the highest level of

excellence is to overcome that pride. And so I'm always a little frustrated when I hear parents whose experience was, well, I don't want my kid to get argumentative and be prideful. And so I just commend all three of you because I think your heart really comes through in even our very short conversation. Any last thoughts on that?

Did you go through this phase of being prideful and getting over it or? Are you still wrestling with it? Or were you exempt from that temptation in the beginning? And we've gotta wrap it up. But this I think is a super important thing for our listeners, Jonathan.

Jonathan Paul: I would love to be able to tell you that I was exempt from that, but I was not. I'm not gonna stand here and say that because I have a sinful heart just like anyone else. And I think speech and debate can lend itself to pride potentially more than other competition. I think all competition does in some way speech and debate is especially tricky with not becoming prideful in your intellect, but I think NCFCA, if you're going to do speech and debate, I think NCFCA is the best league for that because there is one of NCFCA'S values is constructive community, and it's not just something that we talk about. It's something that is built within the tournaments. And like I said, I mean there are certainly people who are very prideful within NCFCA, and all of us are struggling with it. But I think there's a culture of trying to not let that consume your life. Trying to not let that become your identity like Abby was talking about. That is so helpful. And I think every person is going to, in some time in their life, face a lot of temptation to pride and doing it in high school, facing that temptation early with parents, fellow believers, and older students by your side to help you deal with that and to help you rely on the Lord to be sanctified in that is a really good opportunity. I think so can, you could consider it risky, but I think it's worth it to go through that sanctification process.

Andrew Pudewa: Beautiful. Thank you for that answer. That's excellent. Abby, do you have anything to add on that subject of dealing with pride?

Abigail Fagot: Yeah, I wish I could say that I was exempt from it as well, but I was 100% not. I, as I said, I'm the youngest of seven with five older brothers, so I've always been very competitive, but NCFCA has really helped with that. Going off of what Jonathan was saying, just like the culture of it, I mean, we're here, our goal is to be effective communicators for Him, and so I think when you think about it through that perspective, it's a lot easier to not be prideful because we're really doing it for Him, so that way we can bring other people to Him. And so I think that's very helpful. And it is very helpful, like Jonathan was saying, to go through this at a young age, so that way when we're older, we're already knowing how to face this problem.

Andrew Pudewa: Pierce, last comment.

Pierce Stanton: I think the reason so many speakers in NCFCA seem to have that humbleness about them is because prideful people really can't learn. When you focus on yourself, there's no room for improvement, no opportunity to get better. But when we focus

on others who are better than us, better speakers, better debaters, then we try to emulate what they do right and how they speak. And I think that principle is something NCFCA taught me. While I did struggle with pride a little bit, especially initially, once I started focusing on others, but also focusing on God who's really the greatest communicator, the one who's called the Word, that's when I learned that learning is impossible with pride, and thus rejecting that pride and learning to really emulate and follow what others do well and what God does is something we should all strive after.

Andrew Pudewa: So much wisdom from such young people.

Julie Walker: From young people. I chatted with these students before we turned on the mics, and I said to them, my goal for this episode is to convince our listeners not through anything other than their example of how they too can experience the power of competing in NCFCA'S speech program. So I think—mission accomplished.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. And one of the things I've said in public many times is if you're ever feeling a little low on hope for the future, get yourself to a speech and debate tournament and just see young people flourishing in every way. And this episode has been. A taste of that for everyone, but please, O, listeners, get yourself to an NCFCA tournament.

Bring your kids, bring everybody, and you will not regret it. I absolutely guarantee that. In fact, I'll personally refund your gasoline expense if you go to a tournament and are not astounded and excited about the potential. So Jonathan, Abby, Pierce. God bless you. Thank you so much for taking the time to join us today, Jonathan, Abby. Good, good fortune here. I think you said this is your last year. Pierce, You're on to something else. I am not going to ask you. What's up next in your life? Because I don't want to be like that haunted house for high school students where they walk in a dark room and people jump out of the shadows and saying, what do you want to go to school?

What are you gonna do in school? What are you gonna major in? What do you wanna be in your life? I, I'm not gonna be that guy. Thank you again so much, and I do hope that we have a chance to meet in person in the future, and we wish you the very, very best.

Julie Walker: So just to wrap this up, I would be remiss if I didn't say we put our money where our mouth is. We love the opportunity for our students to get experience with speech. We have an *Introduction to Public Speaking* course that we offer. Andrew, you're teaching it. You teach some memorization techniques. I think about the poetry that we have, the students memorize and then recite, and it's just a nice gentle way to get students started on this pathway to perhaps grow into competitive speech and debate.

So it's January. We're on the brink of February right now, and speech tournaments are starting to pop up all across the United States, so we'll put links in the show notes for where you can find a tournament near you so that you can do exactly what Andrew has charged you to do this year. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you, Julie. Thank you, Jonathan, Abby, Pierce.

Jonathan Paul: Thank you so much for having us.

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.