

# Giving the Gift of Confidence

By *Debbie Marchione*

For many people, even the thought of public speaking conjures up deep anxiety. Alumni Nick Van Baak '12 and Katie Gomulkiewicz '13 are helping Bear Creek students conquer that fear and learn to love public speaking through the Bear Creek forensics team. On the forensics team, Middle School and Upper School students train in public speaking and debate for the purpose of competing in interscholastic competition at the local, state, and national levels.

Nick helped to found the forensics team as a sophomore in 2009 and watched it grow rapidly. He now serves as an assistant coach, training team members from October through May three times a week after school and accompanying the team to tournaments. Katie became involved in forensics as a sophomore in 2011 and for the past two years has led a speech and debate summer camp for Bear Creek students.

“The forensics team felt like a family to me,” Nick states. “It helped me improve my social and communication skills and taught me how to think clearly.” He loves coaching the students and watching their confidence grow after each event. Nick reads neuro-cognitive research and brings the knowledge he gains to his coaching. “I see my role as a coach as letting the students develop in their own ways while nudging them toward the best path. Bear Creek students are very self-directed and goal-focused, and they work hard, which is reflected in the team’s rapid growth and success.”



Nick Van Baak '12



Katie Gomulkiewicz '13

Nick notes that while it is not all about the trophies, Bear Creek’s team regularly wins medals in tournaments, and has even sent competitors to the state and national tournaments. This is unusual for a relatively new team.

Reflecting on how his experience as both a competitor and a coach has positively impacted him, Nick comments that, “Through debate I learned to see argumentation as an art, rather than a competition, and that it doesn’t matter if you win an argument, it is more important that you come to a true conclusion.” He is honored to share that philosophy with the students on the team and help

them to find fulfillment and fellowship through forensics.

Katie echoes Nick's gratitude toward the forensics program. "It's a great way to give back to a program that gave so much to me," she reflects. For Katie, being on the forensics team at Bear Creek taught her how to articulate her thoughts in an organized way and gave her a place to express her opinions and passions. She sees how her participation in forensics benefits her in the college classroom as well as in every day conversation. "Forensics really complemented a Bear Creek education by giving me the ability to very effectively convey the knowledge I learned."

Through the week-long summer camp, Katie emphasizes the importance of learning how to both speak and listen well. "It's rare that you get ten minutes of someone's undivided attention to speak your truth and demonstrate what's really important to you. In the same way, forensics teaches you how to really listen when others speak." She also notes the benefits of learning to accept critiques and respond and adapt a presentation based on both negative and positive feedback.



Nick and Katie with their team after Snohomish Panthers Invitational in 2012.

"My favorite part of the camp is seeing how each student evolves, even in just five days. At the end of the week, we do a showcase for the parents and I love to see the students' confidence and pride after the presentation." Many of the students who have attended Katie's camp have joined the forensics team and are continuing to grow in their ability and confidence.

Both Nick and Katie feel honored to be part of this program, and Bear Creek is fortunate that they have chosen to share their skills and passion for forensics with the current generation of students.



Katie leading speech and debate summer camp. Photo by Christina Glass