

# The great debater essay



The Great Debaters is an inspiring true story of the Debate Team consisting of four students and their professor from Wiley College, in Marshall, Texas. As an all black school, Wiley College during the 1930's trained young minds to believe in themselves and to use their educated minds to change the hearts and minds of society, to establish peace, and maintain human dignity, tolerance and acceptance for all people, no matter the color of their skin, origin of their birth, language they speak, or their occupational role in society. For all men are created equal.

The story of The Great Debaters takes place at a time in America's history when things were starting to change for both Whites and African Americans. The moral call for freedom, equality, and justice for all was beginning to resonate throughout the country. As the movie opens, Dr. James Farmer (Forest Whitaker) one of the first black men to earn a Ph. D. He declares, "The most important job in America is the education of our young people." Farmer tells an audience at Wiley College, in Marshall, Texas, that, "There will be different cultures. But we must defeat them.

He challenges his listeners, "They must do what they have to do in order to do what they want to do." The film encourages the idea that "Education is the way out of ignorance and darkness into the glorious light." The students, James Farmer, Jr who was only 14 years old, Henry Lowe, and Samantha Boone, learn to lead through civil discussions using their minds as weapons and not violence. Under the direction of English Professor Melvin B. Tolson, these three students become the Wiley College Debate Team of 1935-36. Professor Tolson sees their potential as individuals and as a team.

Progress is made one victory at a time. Under the intense and encouraging guidance of Professor Tolson, the students learn to speak with clarity and confidence. They learn to assess their own limitations. Defeat becomes an opportunity by which we overcome new obstacles. The most important lesson imparted by Tolson is the difference between our perceived enemies and our legitimate challenges. Tolson trains the team to repeat a series of questions: “ Who is the judge? ” “ The judge is God because he decides who wins or loses. Not my opponent. ” “ Who is my opponent? ” “ He doesn’t exist.

He’s just a mere dissenting voice against the truth that I must speak. ” The importance of training your mind for battle, having resolve in the face of opposition, and keeping cool under pressure even when wrongly or falsely accused is an important and theme in the movie and speaks to the truth we should still live by today. Tolson taught his students that Willie Lynch, historically the most ferocious slave owner in the West Indies, said “ Keep the body, take the mind. ” This ability to kill a person’s soul and rob them of hope or dignity, far exceeds any physical torture or intimidation imposed on a man’s body.

Tolson also charged his students to, “ Find, take back and keep your righteous mind. ” The film portrays the audience attending a debate at the University of Oklahoma as racially polarized: the black audience applauds the Wiley debaters and the white audience applauds their home team. Newspaper reports, however, give a far different account. At the actual event, the audience was caught up in the strength of arguments and

intellectual integrity of the participants on both sides, regardless of race or college affiliation.

This shows that the general public is interested in hearing and learning from a well informed and articulated argument known as debate. Tolson later commented on the event stating: “ When the finest intellects of black youth and white youth meet,” he said, “ the thinking person gets the thrill of seeing beyond the racial phenomena the identity of worthy qualities. ” He went on to elaborate his vision of a moment in the future when the most eloquent and intelligent representatives of both races join forces in a united struggle against racial oppression. For that all-too-brief hour,” he declared, “ the mixed audience seemed to forget their difference, applauding one team as readily as it applauded another.

In the South, I have seen the children of ex-slaves shaking hands with the grandsons of the masters after the debate. ” The film deal with the oppressive conditions of racism and the sheer terror of the Jim Crow system that dominated the South well into the twentieth century. In one scene, Professor James Farmer, Sr. (Forest Whitaker), one of the first African Americans to receive a Ph. D. rom Boston University, being terribly humiliated in front of his family by two white farmers after he mistakenly hit a hog that ran in front of his car. Unable to defy the farmers, he never looks them in the eye and agrees to hand over his monthly pay of \$25, which represents far more than the hog is worth. In another scene, as the team is driving to participate in a debate, they encounter a black man hanging lifeless from a tree. The totally disfigured and barely human body is surrounded by whites who seem to take pleasure in what they have done.

Lynching, organized as a community event, was common place as a means of terrorizing blacks and diverting and suppressing the anger of very oppressed sections of white workers. Tolson in an effort to organize the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), a broad-based protest movement made up of black and white sharecroppers who had been driven off their land and forced into day labor. As the farmers convene a meeting to discuss their strength in unity, they come under attack from a vigilante mob.

It is revealed later in the film that the local sheriff participated in the raid, along with racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. James Farmer, Jr. followed Professor Tolson to one of the meetings one night. When he finally got home well after curfew, his father asked him where he had been but he refused to answer honestly. The reason he did not tell his father is because the meeting had been raided by the sheriff and the KKK and Professor Tolson warned him not to reveal any details of what or who he seen or heard that night.

James Farmer Sr. responded rather violently to his son by hitting him for disrespecting the rules, dishonesty and the family values obedience, honesty and trust. Jr. knew that his father would not understand his disobedience but chose to honor the wishes of Professor Tolson. His father perhaps could have been more patient and understanding and trusted Jr enough to let him keep a secret for now and know that he would not do anything to dishonor his family or God. His core family values were instilled in him from childhood.

Values grounded him to truth and goodness and he always saw the good in people. The Team throughout their journey ultimately challenges and

defeats both African American and white schools during the debate season. When Harvard's debate team accepts a challenge from the Wiley college debate team, they show the world that color has nothing to do with who you are. They argued that civil disobedience is a moral weapon in the fight for justice. The Great Debaters suggest, " We must never kneel before the tyranny of a majority. " As St. Augustine said, " An unjust law is no law at all. "