

The great debaters



Number “ The Great Debaters Were you familiar with the story of the Wiley College debate team? Why do you think their story has not been told before? Surprisingly I was unfamiliar with the story about the Wiley College Debate Team prior to viewing the movie. While watching the movie I wondered why the story of the debate team had not been spotlighted in Black History. However in reflection the non-told story of the debate team is just another historical account of countless other black accomplishments that have been omitted from books. One possible reason for the story not being well known is the basic character and foundational principles of Wiley College itself. From the historical description of the college the school’s basic character is unpretentious with a quiet demeanor preferring to be sublime and not one to seek the spotlight (cite). From its inception in 1873 emphasis and the primary focus of the school’s mission has been on offering a quality education in a environment in which developing the potential in the students has been the priority (Wiley College). 2. Farmer also says “ We do what we have to do, so that we can do what we want to do.” What do you think that means? What things did the debate team “ have to do”? What things did they gain the right to do? James Farmer, Sr. as a black man living in America during the 1930s had experienced the injustices of racism in his lifetime living in the south. Guessing his age in the movie between 35 and 40 he had lived and seen the plight and fight of black people who had only been removed roughly 70 years from slavery. Because of the short time blacks had freedom to make choices Farmer had come to the realization that in order to improve one’s self and others required continually enduring the ill treatment of society. Despite his education and his accomplishments of being a theologian, educator, philosopher, and writer he was still looked

upon as inferior by society's standards. His statement, " We do what we have to do, so that we can do what we want to do," was to inspire the students to become courageous in the pursuit of their dreams. The statement was a " wake up call" to remind them to face and endure the hardships (Jim Crow) placed on Negroes by society with a courageous, unyielding quiet determination persevering until the goal is accomplished. His statement underscored doing things one does not always want to do to become able to do the things one wants to do. 3. Which debate topic did you find most interesting? Did you side with the " pro" or the " con" argument? The topic in which Samantha Booke (with an e) referring to " the look in a mother's eye when she can't feed her child" was soul stirring and ignited a similar response within me (The Great Debaters). By identifying the primary beneficiary of the assistance substantiated the affirmative from my perspective. 4. Why do you think Tolson explained to his students the historical source of the word lynch? What did that have to say about the power of words and their connection to real life? Melvin B. Tolson professor, poet, writer, and activist wanted to make the student conscious of not only the meaning of words but to understand their historical significance. The word " lynch" was a commonly heard and used word during the Jim Crow era and was understood to mean the" hanging to death of a human being"; however Tolson's revelation of uncovering the historical origin of the word gave the word a different connotation. Words are powerful with the ability to create or destroy. Tolson's continuous intellectual challenge of the students was to cause them to independently begin thinking critically and question the obvious and unknown. 5. What is your overall impression of the movie? " My overall impression of the movie is that it contained a number of

underlying themes that subtly taught life principles such as endurance, tolerance, the value of reading and education, and the importance of family and trust. Typically, Harpo Films (Oprah Winfrey) thematically are stories of contrasts that explore the complexity of human relationships (The Great Debaters). The cinematography of the film captured the era using the style of dress, transportation, and the nuances of the times. Even though the backdrop of the film was the ugliness of “ Jim Crow,” the beauty was capturing the aerial shot of the countryside of the train going to Cambridge, MA. The actors’ performances gave depth to the characters and projected the emotions and joys experienced through the plot. A full range of emotions were experienced viewing the film sadness, anger, joy, pride, and competition. Watching the film was entertaining, enjoyable, and learning about the “ Great Debaters” was inspiring. Work Cited The Great Debaters. Dir. Denzel Washington. Perf. Denzel Washington, Forest Whitaker, Nate Parker, and Kimberly Elise. Harpo Films and Denzel Washington Films. 2007. Wiley College. The Wiley College Difference. Web. 30 March 2011 .