DISCUSSION ROUND 1
Students' act of kindness makes big impact on classmate

Student council members at Boiling Springs High School in South Carolina invite fellow classmate who often eats alone to their lunch table.

For the past four years or so, without fail, 16-year-old Andrew Kirby would get the same text from his mom at lunchtime: "Are you sitting with anyone?" And every time, Kirby gave her the same short answer: "No."

Kirby would sit at a table alone, hoping no one would notice he was by himself as he hid behind his cell phone. His mom, Kay, prayed daily he would make a new friend — but somehow, she always ended up disappointed.

This year, on Kirby's first day back as a junior at Boiling Springs High School in South Carolina, Kay's prayers were answered.

Kirby took a seat by himself at a lunch table on Aug. 20. As usual, he got a text from his mom asking if he was alone. But this time, to Kay's surprise, Kirby didn't answer.
Hours later, when she arrived to pick him up, she found out why.

"Mom, I didn't sit alone!" Kirby exclaimed as he entered Kay’s car.

"Wow, that's great!" Kay said, before asking about his new friends.

Kirby explained he was sitting by himself at lunch when he was approached by four student council members who asked him to join them at their table. Kirby happily agreed.

"It's been a constant over the years. He has sat alone and it's always bothered me and my husband. I can picture him sitting by himself," Kay told Fox News, adding she now feels a sense of relief. "Over the years, he's had administration ... staff [sit by him], but he's never had his own peers."

Kay revealed Kirby was adopted. He was born with a crack cocaine addiction and has neurofibromatosis — a genetic condition that causes tumors to grow along the nervous system, according to the Mayo Clinic. The teen has overcome many health issues in recent years, including major back and neck surgeries.

"He's had a lot of challenges," Kay said. "He's bright, but he's just different."

Kirby considers himself shy, but once you get to know him, Kay assures people he's far from quiet. However, Kay admitted, someone has to make an effort to get to know him — which is why she's thankful the Boiling High students stepped up.
"We just wanted to say thank you to them for not being afraid to be a friend to someone," she said. "I would cry when I would leave him at school. It gives me peace and it just helps me as a mother [to see him with friends]."

Kay shared the students' act of kindness on her Facebook page later that day, along with a photo of her son. The image has since been shared nearly 4,000 times and received more than 1,000 comments.

Andrew Kirby poses for a picture as he begins his junior year at Boiling Springs High School in South Carolina. (Kay Kirby)

"Thank you parents of those lonely students for teaching them they don't have to be part of the 'in crowd' and thank you parents of those students who recognized this one boy and included him to your lunch circle. America...one small step to get back to care and compassion instead of hate and division!" one Facebook user wrote.
"This is heartwarming. I hope it continues and they become friends. I also wish for others to see this and begin reaching out to spread love kindness, and friendship. We need more of that in the world," another added.

Damian Howarth, one of the students who invited Kirby to sit with him, told WHNS he was shocked to hear Kirby had sat alone for so long.

"We should have stepped up before and more people should have, too," Howard said, sharing some advice for other students. "Don't be afraid to meet someone new. Just go out and do it."

Kay said Kirby now sits with the kids regularly. He even went to the movie theater with them on Saturday.

"He's doing really good. This has given him confidence. He wants to go to school now," she added.
DISCUSSION ROUND 3

Why debating still matters

A team of teenagers from England have just won this year’s World Schools Debating Championship. But what relevance do skills more often associated with ancient Greece – or public school – have in today’s world?

Alex Clark

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(Tournament moderator note: I know this article is two years old, but I like it.)

The current political scene might have been radically different if Remain had had Diodotus on its side: if you could persuade an assembly of Athenians bent on retribution to spare the lives of a group of rebels, then you could probably best Boris Johnson. The Mytilenian debate of 427BC is perhaps one of the ancient world’s best examples of an argument with something vital at stake: following an unsuccessful insurrection in the city of Mytilene, the Athenians had voted to put to death not only the uprising’s leaders, but all Mytilenian men, and to enslave its women and children. Fears that this judgment erred on the side of harshness led to a second debate, with Diodotus arguing for clemency, and Cleon, “the most violent man at Athens”, opposing him.
Cleon’s point was that justice must prevail in the face of the deliberate malice of the Mytilenians, and that a show of weakness by the imperial government was potentially disastrous; better, he said, to enforce bad laws than to shilly-shally around with good ones. And what, he asked his audience to imagine, would the rebels do if they were in the Athenians’ shoes?

None of this daunted Diodotus, whose counter-argument began with a paean to the power of debate: “The good citizen,” he insisted, “ought to triumph not by frightening his opponents, but by beating them fairly in argument.” And beat Cleon he did, in a series of detailed appeals to his audience, setting out his belief in how Athens’ long-term interests would best be served. The vote was close, but Diodotus won the day. The Mytileneans were spared.

Fast-forward two-and-a-half millennia – past the sight of Johnson and Michael Gove, both presidents of the Oxford Union in the late 1980s, practising in its august chamber for later life – to Stuttgart in July 2016, where ‘Team England beat Canada in the final of the World Schools Debating Championship in a debate about states’ responsibilities towards refugees. Like all good teenagers, the five members of the team (which is funded and supported by the English Speaking Union, who also provide coaching) regularly found time to relax – rapping along to the soundtrack of Hamilton the musical was a favourite activity – but their focus and determination was undeniable.

Their victory allows us to pose a question, or indeed a topic for debate: what is the value and relevance of this kind of debate in the contemporary world, where the word itself has come to be associated more with politicians slugging it out on TV than a honed, elegant rhetorical skill? Whichever side you’re on, it’s hard to see Owen Smith or Jeremy Corbyn as latterday Athenians; their first debate in Cardiff on Thursday night revealed some substantial, outward-looking argument, but also an awful lot of cagey positioning and irritable repudiation of the other’s views, record and ability. And parliamentary debates rarely reach a level we might happily call Ciceronian.

And yet the art of debate involves mastering skills of obvious intrinsic value: the confidence to speak in public, and make sense; the construction of a logical argument; the ability to read an audience’s reactions; and, perhaps most importantly, the willingness to hear others’ arguments, and to respond to them. For Rosa Thomas, one of Team England’s members, being brought face to face with the reality of other debaters’ lives was particularly memorable: “It makes you more aware of your national assumptions,” she says. “For example, that there is a national health service. But you can’t rely on this with an international audience. Also, you are aware that when talking about other countries, there will be individuals from those places in the audience. It makes you think about using more nuanced examples – I remember thinking this during the semi-final, when I used the Israel-Palestine conflict as an example, and seeing some members of the Israel team in the audience.”

If a perception of this kind of competitive debating as old-fashioned and the preserve of public schools and university societies goes unchallenged, then we lose a great deal. Robert Sharpe of
the worldwide writers’ association English PEN sees charges of elitism as a shame, because “the skills one learns through a good debate are crucial for modern life. Political events continue to remind us of the importance of persuasive arguments and good oratory that appeal not only to our rational side, but our emotional side too.” He also thinks the ability to see the other side is particularly important. “The essence of free speech is that we allow people with whom we disagree to speak. Wrongheaded views will be aired. But free speech means no one gets the last word. We can – and indeed, we should – use our own right to free speech to challenge expression we think is unpleasant or wrong. To do this we need to be equipped to argue in public. Debating competitions are a fantastic way to teach this important skill to young people.” Later this year, English PEN will join the Chamber Debate in the House of Lords, in which students from state schools across the country will discuss the issue of free speech.

The discussion of the possible limits and limitations of free speech recurs on an almost constant basis across social media, and perhaps nowhere so starkly as on Twitter, where those disagreeing with one another rail at anyone who will listen – and indeed, anyone who won’t. Twitter’s problem is its encouragement of the individual’s “broadcast mode”, where the superficial appearance of a conversation is, in fact, two or more people simply stating and restating their views with ever-intensifying fury. Nothing real is at stake: the exchange can be abandoned at any point. Hacked off with someone? Block them. Too shy to block? Mute (the word is telling).

But the powerful thing Twitter has going for it is that there is no barrier to entry if you have access to the internet. To take part in a debate, you have to be allowed through the front door in the first place; it’s striking, if not surprising, that Ife Grillo is the only state-educated member of the English debating team. His path to Stuttgart began when he joined Debate Mate, an organisation founded to encourage children from less privileged backgrounds to learn. Meg Hillier, MP for Hackney South and Shoreditch, which contains Grillo’s school, the Bridge Academy, makes the point that his success is particularly exciting because “it shows that Hackney schools are not just about exam results and rote learning, they’re about teaching wider life skills. The ability to speak well is something that’s useful throughout the employment process.” Hillier also thinks the idea of a generation plugged into social media, not listening to one another, is unduly pessimistic: “I was at a debate on the EU referendum the other day, and it was full of talented, bright young people making their case very reasonably. I told them we could probably learn from them in parliament.”

Those still in need of convincing of the importance of debate as a force for social change should watch The Great Debaters, in which Denzel Washington stars as Melvin B Tolson, a real-life teacher at the largely black Wiley College in Texas, who in the 1930s coached his debating team in the face of prejudice. And the idea of prejudice within debate is key throughout history: for arguments to be properly heard, one has first to accept that all have the right to make them, and to believe in a commonality of capability, capacity and sensibility.

Think, for example, of the fourth act of The Merchant of Venice, in which the characters gather to determine whether Shylock shall have his pound of flesh from Antonio. As Bassanio pleads
with Shylock, Antonio tells him, “I pray you, think you question with the Jew: / You may as well go stand upon the beach / And bid the main flood bate his usual height”; he ends with a declaration that nothing is harder than a Jew’s heart. The point may seem to be simply describing Shylock’s implacability – but the fact that it occurs as Shylock is using logic and reason to rebuff the noblemen creates a link between his capacity for debate and the idea of him as inhumane, beyond empathy. It’s not that Shylock isn’t good enough at winning the argument; it’s that he’s too good.

The slaughter of the Mytileneans, the extraction of a pound of flesh; not all debates have such visceral and bloodthirsty subject matter. But the greatest encounters have altered the course of history: Thomas Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce dissecting the theory of evolution in Oxford in 1860; the war cabinet debate of 1940 that led to Churchill’s ascendance; Richard Nixon’s sweat-coated appearance against a fit, tanned JFK in the 1960 presidential race. The elision of the purer forms of debate with politicians seeking advancement is a more recent development – and one we might be ambivalent about inasmuch as it rewards the slick and telegenic. Jeremy Corbyn’s fervent following demonstrates that the electorate is keen for what it sees as authenticity and a lack of spin; others may argue that Corbyn’s plain-speaking is also a persona. I asked Sam Leith, author of *You Talkin’ to Me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama*, what he thought.

“It’s tempting to look at modern-day political debates and think what a long way we’ve come from the days of Cicero and Pericles,” he told me. “But it’s worth remembering that the whole game is knowing your audience, and knowing the medium. Nowadays, the main audience for a debate won’t be the people in earshot: the exchange is intended to be, as it were, overheard by hundreds of thousands of people on television and social media. So, of course, people don’t make three-hour-long, perfectly turned speeches intended to be taken in whole: they semaphore emotion, repeat key words, pepper it with catchphrases and soundbites. And that’s what works.”

And what’s his view of a young generation of Ciceros? “Debating in schools seems to teach you things unlearnable in other ways: not only how to construct an argument (and rejig it on the hoof), but how its success depends more than anything on the form of its expression. It teaches you to think on your feet and fight dirty. Plus public speaking is shit-scary, and that’s good for kids.”

If we are to hold our politicians to account – especially as we enter a protracted period of negotiations about our national future – then it is as well to be able to follow the arguments of those in power and expose their inconsistencies. We have just come through an epochal political event that saw the repeated claim by voters that they couldn’t make their way through the thicket of facts, half-facts and rhetoric put before them. Time to say goodbye to that cloud of unknowing: joining the debate is more of a necessity than ever before.
Photographer defends picture of baby boy posing with a BB gun: 'This photo is in no way meant to encourage gun violence'
An Indiana photographer is in hot water for re-creating scene from *A Christmas Story*. (Photo: Coffee Creek Studio)

A photographer in Shelbyville, Ind., is celebrating Christmas a little early this year, sharing a photo of a baby that re-creates a scene from the holiday classic *A Christmas Story*. Despite her intent to spread cheer, however, Amy Haehl of Coffee Creek Studio is receiving mixed reactions to her photo of a baby boy dressed up as Ralphie — pink bunny suit, gun, glasses, and all.

Haehl took to her business’s Facebook page to post one of her latest works, a photograph of a baby boy named William in a setting with miniature furniture that looks nearly identical to what’s in the film. The one prop some could have done without was the mini BB gun, crafted from wood.

“Ralphie loved his pink bunny suit I had made for him!” Haehl captioned the photo, before adding a disclaimer about the fake gun. “The BB gun is made of wood to ensure that he did not shoot his eye out during the creation of this photo.”

Real or fake, a couple of her followers shared their concerns about portraying a child with the weapon in today’s political climate.
“Will now unfollow you. Who the hell would take a picture of a baby and a gun just for money. Such a waste since you are so talented. Think hard about your lack of principles,” someone commented. Haehl replied to clarify that she hadn’t in fact been paid to do it. “In a world where there’s so much negative let’s be positive and laugh a little! I clearly stated the gun was wood just in case someone would be concerned.”

Another complaint followed: “Also unfollowing and unliking you. Extremely distasteful. How do you think the parents of the babies that were killed in Newtown would feel looking at this photo? Guns are never ‘cute,’ not even as a prop or movie reference. Disgusting. I hope none of our babies are ever shot. The gun culture in this country is a disgrace.”

Still, Haehl tells Yahoo Lifestyle that she meant to “bring a smile to people’s faces” with the re-creation.

“Of course I know in the world we live in I was taking the chance that someone would be offended, and I definitely did take that into consideration while still creating a photo with the perfect details,” she says. “I know there have been a few comments made in regards to gun violence, and this photo is in no way meant to encourage gun violence or offend anyone who has been affected by gun violence.”

In fact, the photographer says that she had intended to remind people of a time when life was simpler, which seemed to resonate with many people.

Many commenters picked up on the nostalgia of the photo, saying that it put them in the Christmas spirit and they’d love to do this with their own children. For Haehl, it was the kind of challenge that she feels is necessary sometimes to keep her from burnout in her profession.

“I have learned through my years as a photographer that sometimes you have to do something that fuels your creativity to be excited about and avoid burnout,” she explains. “This photo is that for me.”