

GREAT EXPERIENCE

submitted by
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I moved from Taiwan to California when I was sixteen to receive a better education, and because I lacked English skills. I started my studies at Leland High School in San Jose as an ESL student. During my first year, I was shy and quiet toward other people until I had a great opportunity to participate in the ESL speech tournament. I never thought I would be in a speech tournament, especially as an ESL student.

During the second semester at Leland our English teacher, Mrs. Aguilera, gave us an assignment to make a speech in class. She also encouraged us to participate in the ESL tournament, which was coming up at the same time. She said it would be a good experience for us, and we could compete with ESL students from schools throughout Santa Clara County. At the be-

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ginning no one was brave enough to raise his or her hand when Mrs. Aguilera asked who would like to participate. I asked my friends if they wanted to participate in the tournament, but their answer was "No! It's too scary." So we decided we would give our speech only in class. After a week, Mrs. Aguilera asked who would sign up for the speech tournament, but I thought she asked who found their subject for the speech, and I found a poem "Mulan" that I wanted to recite, so I raised my hand. After I realized that I was going to participate in the tournament, I was a bit surprised, but I thought to myself "It will be a good experience anyway, so I might as well do my best."

In the next couple of weeks we stayed after school almost every day to receive help from our teacher and members of the Speech and Debate Team. They helped us make corrections in our speech and taught us some public speaking techniques, such as how to use gestures and make eye contact with the audience, to make our speech more impressive. They also listened to our speeches and gave useful advice. One of the students who was helping us, Katherine, told us that the judges did not know our speech so it was all right if we made a mistake during the performance. Making mistakes was always a big deal for me, and whenever I made a mistake I felt that I had to correct it right away. I would start to focus on the mistake and spend a lot of

time fixing it, but Katherine's advice made me realize that not everything goes as planned and mistakes are a natural process of learning. What is important is to focus on your goal and not to let any mistakes stop you from accomplishing it. They also corrected our pronunciation. Our enunciation was not very good, and most of the time we did not know that we pronounced a word wrong, so it really helped when they corrected our pronunciation. This was probably the first time I was in touch with other students who were not ESL students and I was surprised at how friendly and patient they were with us. I used to think that ESL students were different, and people would treat us differently because English was not our first lan-

guage, but Katherine and the other members of the debate team were not like that at all. I discovered that communicating with people was not as hard as I had thought. Most of the time people were delighted to help us if we had any language problems, so after spending time with Katherine and the other members I started to open myself to others. The day of the tournament finally came, and we were all nervous and excited. When the tournament began I did not know if I could perform as well as I had in practice. I got a little nervous and forgot a few lines of my speech during the first and second round, but I remembered what Katherine told me so I just kept talking and smiling as if nothing went wrong, and no one noticed. And you

know what, it worked. I was so happy that the first and second rounds were finally over. I also earned a place in the final round. I gained a lot of courage and confidence because I knew it was natural to be afraid of making mistakes. When it was my turn to make my speech, I knew how to handle the pressure. I took a deep breath and went up. I started out with a nice loud voice and the use of my gestures was just right to make my speech more effective. One hard thing about making a speech is to have good eye contact with the audiences, but I talked as if I were talking to my friends and looked straight at them. I maintained eye contact with all in the room to let them feel that they were important and respected. I used the experience I gained from the first two rounds and made my best performance. When they announced the results, I was excited to find out I won first place in the oral interpretation section. I received a certificate of achievement, a trophy and much, much more. Through the speech tournament I gained self-confidence, became more outgoing and learned how to handle pressure. I also learned that even if I am an ESL student I can still do things that English speaking students do. It might be a bit harder for
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me but if I put in more time and effort I believe I can do just as well as other students and the trophy would always remind me of this.

It's been two years since I was an ESL student. Back then, I received help from others when I needed it and I know what it feels like when you need someone to help you. Now I want to give help to others when I can. I am no longer an ESL student, however, those experiences will always be a part of me.