

A TRIBUTE TO LANNY

by Greg Malis

The honors and awards bestowed upon him in his career were tremendous. Emory University Elected him to be one of the Key Coaches of the Barkley Forum for High Schools. This society normally honors excellence in coaching debate, so to be an I.E. coach honored by this group is a true tribute to his success. In fact, the NFL named him national coach of the year four times after leading two different schools to national sweepstakes championships in the late 1970's and early 1980's. These organizations honored his ability as a coach. On February 22, 1998, I lost a colleague.

The Texas Forensic Association established an award in his honor about four years ago. They present this award annually to the school that qualified the most students to the state tournament. Additionally, he served as president of TFA as well as the Texas Speech Communication Association in the 1980's. His most significant accomplishment in the area of speech education is that he led the fight to make speech a graduation requirement for all public high school students in Texas. He testified before the Texas Education Agency; he brought business and civic leaders who could also testify to the value of a formal training in speech. For the past two years, Texas students have benefited from being able to take speech, debate, or oral interp to satisfy this new requirement. The formal forensics organizations in Texas honored his ability as a leader. On February 22, 1998, I lost a role model.

Few colleagues have shaped my career as much as he has. I met him for the first time at the Fargo Nationals in 1992. Two weeks later, I was in San Antonio, interviewing for a position at Clark High School, which I ultimately accepted and had the chance to teach and coach there for four years. He served as Director of Fine Arts for the North East Independent School District, where he was responsible for competitive speech and debate programs at five large high schools. My school was not one of them, yet I received support from him as if I were his employee. I first realized this at my first NFL District tournament as a coach in April 1993. One of my policy debate teams had just won the first round and qualified for nationals. In that final round, we defeated his school - the one he once directed and

put on the national forensics map. What I discovered is that he was just as proud of what my students accomplished as he would have been if they were his own. What I discovered is that when he puts his arm around me or hugged my students in congratulations, that my life would become permanently altered. On February 22, 1998, I lost a motivator.

For the next three years, I tapped into his energy, took advantage of his experience and wisdom, and was grateful for his support. I had the courage to pursue coaching and directing my own forensics program because of the confidence he displayed in me. As District Chair or Regional coordinator, he gave me responsibilities that I did not think I would ever be given. When he learned that I was looking for new job opportunities, he wrote letters of recommendations, talked to prospective employers, and simply encouraged me to follow my vision. I believe that I will know how successful of a teacher or coach I may be only if my students return to me years after they have left my classroom to share with me what they have made of their lives. Any success that my students gain at a tournament or on a test is not evidence of good teaching or coaching, for they are only short-term measurements. The long-term effect is what will count, so I may never know the results. Therefore, any long-term success I have as a teacher or as a coach can be attributed to one of my great mentors. I was twenty-one when I started taking his class and was twenty-five when I left. On February 22, 1998, I lost a great teacher.

My first image is the most powerful and frightening. I knew when I left San Antonio two years ago that I would dearly miss him. I looked forward to the times at which our tournament paths would cross - in Texas, Illinois, Georgia, and others. Last April, when he asked me to be in the debate tab room at NFL Nationals, I was honored - not because of any inherent honor that may come with being in the tab room, but with the opportunity to spend time with him, talk with him, laugh with him, and feed off his energy and enthusiasm once again. However, I never had that chance. About a month before nationals, he fell victim to a massive brain hemorrhage and subsequent stroke.

He spent the next six to eight weeks in intensive care. Last August, I went back to San Antonio for a speech and debate workshop and was determined to see him again. I went to the rehab center not knowing exactly what to expect. I once admired a tall, energetic man with a constant smile. What I saw, though, was a man who had to be pushed in a wheelchair by an orderly or his wife. What I saw, though, was a man who would not have remembered who I was if it were not for some coaching from his wife. If I had known that my emotionally-draining sixty minute visit would have been my last opportunity to see him, I might still be there. His recovery over the year was progressing wonderfully. Just one week before he died, he was walking on his own with help of parallel bars or in the less stressful medium of a swimming pool. His speech was becoming more fluid and his smile was returning. On February 22, 1998, I lost a model of determination.

This speech so far begs the following question: Why do I take your time this evening when you are eager to find out the results to tell you about a man that few of you, if any, have ever met. The answer is on your NFL membership cards and certificates if you were inducted either last school year or this. The final title that he was given was that of President of the National Forensic League. His signature appears on your cards if inducted in the NFL in the past two years. What I promise you is that despite its impersonal appearance, despite the obvious copy, he was just as proud when he signed the first blank certificate to be reproduced hundreds of times as he was when he signed the membership cards or certificates for his own students at Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Churchill High Schools. What he loved are those who practice the art of verbal communication - whether they are in the form of theatrical interpretations, public speaking, or academically debating. He loved it every time you practiced that piece one more time or went to the library one more time - he loved it when you performed or spoke to the best of your ability. Whether or not you are one who will be honored tonight, whether or not you will have the changed to represent Louisiana at NFL Nationals this year or ever, he loved what you did and how you did it.

He knew his students exceptionally well, he knew my Clark students fairly well, but he probably never knew many of you. However, he smiled when he signed your card or certificate and welcomed you with open arms into his forensics community.

I think of him now and I smile again. On February 22, 1998, I lost a valued part of my life. On February 22, 1998, I shed my least tear and said my last good-bye to our beloved president, mentor, and teacher, Mr. Lanny Dean Naegelin.

(Greg Malis coaches at Isidore Newman School in New Orleans, LA. This speech was delivered at the Louisiana NFC District Awards Assembly, March 28, 1998).