

OF ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS IN FORENSICS

by

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The Farewell Line is a tradition at our school. Immediately after the conclusion of our graduation exercises, the faculty line up on the path leading to our track and, on their way to the gym where we have refreshments set up, the just-graduated seniors pass along the line of faculty shaking hands with each in turn. Last June, I stood in that line of faculty awaiting the arrival of Tom, a very special student for me. He was a student whom I had coached for four years in original oratory and who had had considerable success on the national

we found out later, he advanced to finals in first place. But at the awards assembly, unbelievably, he was announced in third place. Of course, we all kept on our poker faces and congratulated the winners, but the disappointment was devastating. When the assembly was over and the coaches and students were dispersing back to their schools and homes, the poker faces broke. I looked at Tom and he was stricken. Tears welled up in his eyes as he said, over and over, "I don't understand what happened. I don't understand what happened." We looked at the ballots and

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saw that in the final round Tom had probably not done his best. No first places, ranks mostly from 2 to 4. Under normal circumstances his lead going into the round was large enough that that would not have mattered – except for the proverbial one judge who seemed particularly off-put by his presentation and ranked him last, seventh, in the round. This was enough to put him into third place by one rank. So here I was, in the library of LaSalle High School, with a student who was practically another son to me, as he looked at me for answers. "I just

level. But there had been one great disappointment this year – by virtue of an unexpected judging decision, he had not qualified for NFL nationals. Today, in contrast, on his graduation day, he had achieved his greatest triumph. He was the class valedictorian and, bringing all of his forensic experience to bear on this once in a lifetime occasion, he had delivered the only valedictory in the history of our school to be accorded a standing ovation. As I stood waiting for him to reach me in the line, I thought back to two earlier occasions during the year that for me, and I think for all coaches, bring into focus just what forensics is all about and why we all do it.

don't even feel like going on," he said. "This is everything I've worked for. To go to NFL nationals in my senior year. Everything. It doesn't feel like there's any point in going on." In my heart I knew that this was not right, that this was just his disappointment and frustration talking; but I also didn't know what else to say. So like any good forensic coach, I just started talking. What came out was something that I have believed since I began coaching but which I really had never put into words – at least not these words – before. "Tom," I said, "I understand how you feel. I can't imagine why this happened. But you have to understand that this is *not* everything that you have worked for. This is just forensics. It's great, but it's not everything you've worked for. You don't know yet what you've worked for. You've told me you want to be a lawyer. Well, someday, when you are standing in a courtroom before a judge or jury and you are making a plea to save the life of an innocent person or to achieve justice for some poor person, that will be what you have worked for. When you save that life or get that justice, and you do it with your eloquence and your passion and your conviction, that will be why you have done forensics for these past four years. So don't think that everything that you have worked for has gone for nothing. Trust me, what you've

The first of the occasions was the "great disappointment." March, NFL District qualifiers. Tom arrived at the tournament with every expectation of success. So far, he had had an excellent year – especially considering the strength of the competition in our district. With two or three other outstanding orators, he had consistently placed high or won at all of the local and regional tournaments. Finals at Emory, semi-finals at Harvard, neither he nor I had any doubt that he would be one of the two qualifiers from our district for NFL nationals. The early rounds bore out our expectation and, as

worked for hasn't even happened yet."

We got through that traumatic experience and Tom went on to have an otherwise very successful conclusion to his senior year. He won our local CFL championship, our State championship, placed third in CFL nationals. The disappointment of NFL districts receded into the background, but was never, of course, completely forgotten. We moved forward toward what would be, for me and for Tom, the second event that would put forensics into perspective for us.

As the end of the year approached at Holy Ghost Prep, we turned our attention to selecting the valedictorian. At our school, students over a certain GPA are invited to submit speeches to the Principal. After he removes the students' names and makes a note of who wrote which speech, he turns copies of them over to the members of the Honors Committee. After the speech is chosen, the student is sent to me to polish it and work on delivery. Tom's speech was the one chosen and, of course, I was thrilled. This meant that he and I would have one last chance to work on a speech together. In Tom's case, though, after four years in forensics, not too much polishing was needed in either area. His speech was superb and I knew he would deliver it with passion and panache.

The day before graduation, after the practice which made sure that everyone knew where to go, how to stand and where to look so the photographer could get good pictures, Tom and I were standing alone under the huge tent which would house the commencement exercises the following morning. We had waited behind for everyone else to leave so that he could practice the speech and get a feel for the microphone and the environment. We talked about the usual things – sound system, wind, etc. – and then, as he turned to go up to the lectern to begin, he stopped and turned back and said, "Well, Mr. B., this is the end. It's all over after tomorrow."

"Yep," I said, with a nostalgic smile, "this is it. It's all done. But it's been a great run." As soon as I said this, though, something else struck me and I said, "You know what – it's not done. It's not really the end. For the last four years you've gone out on weekends to stand in rooms filled with other competitors to be judged by coaches or parents or whomever. When you think about it, that's really an artificial situation, Tom. Tomorrow is a real situation. Tomorrow, you will be delivering the first *real* speech of your life. No judges, no competition. Just people listening to you and your chance to communicate your

thoughts and feelings, the thoughts and feelings of your classmates. People are looking to you to do this. So, if you think about it, Tom, this isn't the end. Remember, when you said to me after NFL districts, that you didn't know why you should go on because that was everything you had worked for, and I said that it wasn't, that what you had worked for hadn't happened yet? Well, tomorrow is the beginning of what you've worked for. It's starting to happen. It's the beginning of your real career as a communicator."

So there I was, graduation morning, standing in the Farewell Line as Tom reached me. I had tears in my eyes and could hardly talk as I gave him a long hug and told him how proud I was of him and that he was the only student ever to receive a standing ovation for his valedictory. In the succeeding months, I've thought of this often and of all the other young men and women who thought that their forensic careers ended in June. I've thought of coaches like myself, who have had to wipe away tears, give hugs of reassurance and pep talks to go out and do it all again the following week. Why do we do it? Of course, we enjoy the awards and the recognition and we work for them, but the majority of the thousands of young men and women in forensics do not become national champions or even district champions or state champions. They do, however, week after week, year after year, write speeches, cut and memorize literature, research information, build cases and practice, practice – to try to win, of course, but I also believe that in the back of their minds, and ours as coaches, there is the constant presence of the conviction that while winning is fun, it's not the whole thing. Somehow we know, but don't often put into words the fact that this wonderful artificiality that is forensics is not *an* end and when graduation comes, it's not *the* end. Rather we know in our hearts, as Tom and I learned this year, the real reasons why we do forensics hasn't happened yet. And when forensics is all over, it's really just the beginning.

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