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Gateway speech team racks up its awards with maturity

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Gateway Community and Technical College's speech team is building on its success.

Last month, the team earned a second-place award in individual events in the community college division at the Kentucky Forensic Association State Tournament at Transylvania University. Last year, its first, the team placed high in several competitions and sent one member to the prestigious Interstate Oratory Association contest.

"The speech team has worked diligently both individually and as a team to compete at the highest levels," said Michelle Deeley Wilhite, associate professor of oral communication and the team's coach.

"Though smaller in number than many programs from community colleges and four-year institutions, our group has been very strong since its inception last year and increasingly competitive."

"We do have a few new members on the team. However, most of the team members are returning from last year."

Wilhite said the team's demographics is key to its success.

"Our success is due to the talent and maturity of our team members," she said. "The average age of a speech team member at Gateway is 29 years. We are a team of nontraditional students. These students are juggling work, families and school. When they make a decision to participate on the team, they give 110 percent. I have coached speech and debate teams at other colleges, but I have never seen the same level of student dedication."

Melisa Bissonette, 38, is studying business administration. She has competed since the team's founding.

"I have received so much from the speech team," Bissonette said. "I have learned a deepened respect for the faculty - most of all our faculty sponsors Dr. Michelle Deeley Wilhite and Melissa Fry; self confidence; and a love for public speaking."

Rosemary Wolfe, 30, said her new-found confidence extends past the podium.

"I have more confidence in myself, not just with public speaking, but also socially. I used to be skittish in social situations, but now I'm not so scared," she said. Wolfe said competing makes her feel "unbelievably great."

"I get such a rush when I get up there and just know that I wowed the judges."

Wilhite said the team is open to all Gateway students. "Our team philosophy is to allow any student to join the team as long as he/she is willing to work to improve his/her communication skills," Wilhite said. "Students can compete as long as they practice with the coaches and make progress."

"While we have had success in winning trophies, that is not our focus."

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