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Birmingham debate team's sights on skills, scholars

By Lindsey Shelton
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SpeakFirst team members Sydney Page, left, and Jennifer Moore have earned scholarships to the University of Alabama and Vanderbilt University, respectively.

Birmingham's SpeakFirst citywide debate team members have raked in \$2.5 million in college scholarship offers over the past three years.

They won local competitions against Mountain Brook, Homewood and Vestavia Hills high schools and they won a district championship to secure their place for the first time ever at the national high school debate championships.

Now, the team, comprising students from throughout the metro area, is looking for new recruits.

Impact Alabama, said the main quality SpeakFirst looks for in freshman recruits is a desire to go to college.

Stephen Black, founder and president of

"They don't necessarily have to be a natural debater," he said. "We're looking for someone who has a commitment to go to college, will work hard and also who makes really good grades."

The good grades, coupled with strong debate skills, help boost the student's confidence and also gives the students an advantage in applying for college scholarships.

Jennifer Moore and Sydney Page, the team members who recently placed in the nation's top 100 debaters at nationals, will both go to college this fall on scholarships.

Moore, who has been awarded a \$226,000 scholarship to Vanderbilt University, joined SpeakFirst as a freshman at Ramsay High School. She was recommended by her middle school counselor and she had family ties to debate.

"I decided to join and see if it would be something I would enjoy," said the 17-year-old who plans to become a lawyer.

Page, who joined the team her sophomore year at Ramsay, chose debate because she said she wanted to try new things.

"I had never really participated in debate," Page said. "After the first tournament, I really liked it, and I was pretty good at it for having just started."

She will attend the University of Alabama, studying history and computer technology and applications. She has scholarship offers totaling \$91,000.

Preparation

To prepare for the national tournament, the two debaters practiced for four weeks, up to five hours each day. They researched their debate topic and wrote arguments about current trends in American political speech. "It was a lot of work at the beginning, but once we got in the swing of things it evened out," Moore said. "We realized the work was necessary to be prepared for a national competition. It taught us that the hard work we've put in so far will have to be amplified."

Their preparation paid off.

The pair ranked among the top debate teams in the country and both are considering continuing some form of debate participation in college.

Black, who founded SpeakFirst in 2004, said while topics such as high school dropout rates and low achievement scores get lots of attention, there are good stories, like the success of students such as Moore and Page.

"This shows that there are kids out there who make good grades, play by the rules and join clubs," he said. "This gives them the opportunity to compete at the highest level of academic programming."

A total of 32 students have been involved with SpeakFirst since it started, Black said. All have gone to college, and all but one team member received scholarships, including all four of this year's seniors.

Black said SpeakFirst is a good model for debate teams.

Page said SpeakFirst has helped her hone her research, writing and public speaking skills.

"I am very rarely nervous to speak in public," she said. "I think that confidence is going to be beneficial to me in college as well as adulthood."

Moore said SpeakFirst prepares students for what they will face in college and the real world.

"SpeakFirst gives students confidence that they might not have otherwise gotten," she said. "Not just through the friendships, but actually getting up in front of a room of people and giving a speech that you have been preparing for weeks. That's the confidence students need to be successful in the real world."