

Pass It On®...

Lift Your Voice, Use Your Mind, Lift Others.

How a spark plug of a teacher ignites possibilities within her students in classroom 161.

Anna Steed doesn't look much older than her students, but she is a practitioner of behavioral and motivational science, an aficionado of oration, a shoulder to cry on, and the high school debate coach. Her class, which began as an elective class to give Black and Latino students exposure to skills that prepare them for college, has become the class on campus that creates winners.

Speech and debate test the teenage character perhaps more than any other activity. The shy, the vulnerable, the unsure and the introverted often have no desire to look up from their screens and engage in the oldest human interaction: persuasive oral arguments. It's formidable territory for the average teenager. Research, writing, delivering a speech in front of your peers — it all sounds like the kind of class students would be most likely to skip. But Anna draws them in.

Classroom 161 is always full. Anna's debate teams have a case full of trophies; most importantly, they have gone on to become leaders of their communities and examples to their families.

"This activity has changed my life. Just building connections with people I never, ever imagined building connections with," relates Alexander Hernandez Gonzalez. Alexander suffered from social anxiety throughout his childhood. Then he discovered debate as a freshman, and it changed his life.

His teammate Bresean Chambers is a confident athlete who played on the basketball team until his senior year before devoting all his competitive time to speech and debate. "I came from basketball, but I would have to say, with my whole heart, this is the most fun I've ever had with any club I've ever been in."

What drives young people to stand up and passionately deliver a speech in front of a crowd full of strangers, a panel of judges and opposing teams from more privileged high schools? The person who will always have their back: Anna Steed.

"I know that no matter what, Steed will always be there for me," says Ariana Nungaray-Nunez, an alumnus of the class. Ariana is one of the proud and confident students who still refer to their teacher and coach as Mama Steed. When students need a lift, she is there. When they need a suit, she helps them find one. When they're hungry, she takes care of that, too.

"I want them to just have the memory of making it through, succeeding in a place like that and expressing a story that leaves that place better," Anna says.

That better place begins in room 161 when unsure and nervous students enter for the first time. After setbacks and adjustments, a lot of hugs, encouragement, and hours of late-night study and practice, they roll out a few years later with their shoulders back and a full tank of confidence, ready to take on the next stage of life. Look closely, and you'll see a few tears. Mama Steed has prepared them for the competition of life. But it's always hard to see your kids grow up.

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