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Towson U. debaters take national championship

First African-American duo to win title are grads of city high schools

By Nick Madigan

Sun reporter

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Dayvon Love and Deven Cooper don't object to being called argumentative. They thrive on it.

The two members of [Towson University](#)'s debate team happily accepted congratulations yesterday after winning a national championship -- the Cross Examination Debate Association's five-day tournament in Wichita, Kan. -- and making history by being the first African-Americans to do so.

Cooper, who turned 22 yesterday, and Love, 20, emerged victorious Monday night from a field of more than 180 two-person teams in the tournament, during which they overcame top-seeded debaters from Missouri State University, the University of Northern Iowa and elsewhere. In the final round, Love and Cooper beat a team from the University of Kansas by a decisive score of 7-4.

"We didn't really expect to win it," Cooper, a graduate of Lake Clifton High School in Baltimore, said yesterday while traveling to Fullerton, Calif., for another tournament this weekend. Asked how they had celebrated, he said, "We went to [IHOP](#)."

But what made the duo's achievement not only remarkable but groundbreaking was that they had turned debate traditions upside down deciding not to argue their chosen topic -- whether the United States "should constructively engage with a Middle East country." Instead, in a direct challenge to the judges and the system under which they operate, the pair made their central premise the notion that, as Cooper said, "the problems of exclusion in the debate community need to be addressed first."

By that, Cooper said, he meant the "racism, sexism and homophobia" that pervade the kind of tournament at which they were speaking. "We have a responsibility to talk about these things," he said. "We talk about racism the most because it's the one we're most affected by. Even at awards banquets, they make jokes that the community laughs at, but the people who they affect don't laugh."

In addition, Cooper and Love used various forms of expression, including hip-hop, clips of songs and "spoken word," to accentuate their points, a far cry from the more straightforward, evidence-laden presentations of some of their competitors.

"They debate in a style that is definitely outside the conventions of most teams," said Darren Elliott, president of the Cross Examination Debate Association, which oversees policy debate competitions for two- and four-year colleges in the country. "It's a very nontraditional style. That was clearly their strength."

Elliott, who is director of the debate program at Kansas City Kansas Community College, said the Towson team showed courage in trying to "engage the community in changing how we talk about things, how we deal with these issues of race and sex and socioeconomic class." In doing so, Elliott said, Love and Cooper confronted their judges, the tournament's organizers and other debaters by "telling them that what they're doing is not as productive as some alternatives."

From Love's point of view, it did not initially appear to be a winning strategy at the tournament, whose previous winners have included Northwestern and Harvard universities.

"There were people talking about how we were going to lose," said Love, a graduate of Forest Park High School who, like Cooper, learned his debate skills under the tutelage of the Baltimore Urban Debate League. "If people had told us a couple of days ago that we were going to win, I would have said, 'You're lying.'"

The experience, he said, was "intense," especially waiting for judges to make up their minds in each of the rounds, a process that he said sometimes took as long as 45 minutes.

Pam Spiliadis, director of the Baltimore Urban Debate League, which was founded in 1999 as part of an Open Society Institute effort to bring debate into urban classrooms, said it was the "first time in history that two young black men have won this tournament."

She said it was also a "momentous day" for Baltimore and for "young people from urban communities all across this nation who are too often the voices that are never heard."

Andres Alonso, chief executive of the Baltimore public school system, was equally pleased by the news from Kansas. "This extraordinary achievement is testimony to these amazing young men, to the Baltimore Urban Debate League, and to the community of the Baltimore City public schools," he said. "We are proud, excited and inspired to have Baltimore's young people leading the nation."

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