

The Case for UIL Congressional Debate

What do a Middle East immigrant, an attorney for the Southern Poverty Law Center, a Congressional aspirant, the governor of Kansas, and the CEO of a data service company have in common? On the surface, little or nothing. But check more closely their resumes. They are the 2007 through 2011 recipients of the Harold Keller Public Service Leadership Award presented annually by the Stennis Center for Public Service Leadership. Named for Harold Keller, often and affectionately called “Mr. Congress,” Ali Azizi, Tamara Serwer Caldas, Joshua Segall, Governor Mark Parkinson, and Ryan Mulholland met the twin requirements of the Leadership Award: they had to compete in Congressional Debate at the National Forensics Leagues’ national tournament and they had to enter into public service as a result of their deep commitment and who have made significant contributions to their community, state, or nation through public service leadership.

I cannot attest to the service of Azizi, Caldas, Segall, or even Governor Mark Parkinson. But I do have rather extensive insight into Ryan Mulholland. We moved from Texas to Wyoming in the early 90s. I taught in a 1A school in the center of the State, which Ryan attended. Young Mr. Mulholland participated in the Senator John C. Stennis National Congress in the House of Representatives in 1995, and the Senate in 1996 and 1997. He was Senate Champion and Final Session Presiding Officer in 1997, the same year the National Presiding Officer Award was established, the first of only three students to-date to win both the tournament and Presiding Officer Award. From a school of 98 students, he went on to win it all.

Yet, that was hardly an ending for Ryan. Utilizing the skills he had learned in Congressional Debate, he was a deputy sergeant with the Sheriff’s Office, where he was involved in planning, development, and implementation of an extensive and highly secure law enforcement computer network. He also served with the State’s Division of Criminal Investigation. He is currently the chief executive officer and principal founder of Ptolemy Data Systems, a technology company in a Rocky Mountain city where he serves on the city council.

But this isn’t a story about Ali Azizi, Tamara Serwer Caldas, Joshua Segall, Governor Mark Parkinson, and Ryan Mulholland, and certainly not about me. This is a story of what a difference Congressional Debate can make in the life of young students and the path it can place them on for a lifetime of public service – and, oh, how we sorely need more of these public servants. There is just something about the young men and women who participate in Congress that sets them apart. No, they may well not be the best debater or extemper or orator or prose/poetry/humor/drama/whatever person. Like the triathlete, one need not be the best at any one event, but the best combined. But to be the best in Congress depends on having sufficient skills in all of the above events to advance the debate on the floor of the chamber, solicit the votes needs, create a collegial environment, to disagree without being disagreeable, and advance the agenda.

Are all of those abilities life skills? Ask Azizi, Caldas, Segall, Parkinson, or Mulholland. Better yet, ask the communities they serve.

Both Tamara Serwer Caldas (San Antonio) and Ryan Mulholland (through the sixth grade) lived and were educated in the State of Texas. Both were fortunate enough to attend high schools affiliated with the National Forensic League, where they could enjoy the advantages of Congressional Debate. But I think of the thousands of students in 100s of unaffiliated high schools around the state that will never have the opportunity these two had. I submit that the University Interscholastic League would be ill-advised to fail to capitalize on this unique event and make it available as a competitive UIL event during the next school year. Because of this positive endorsement by UIL, the State and our Nation will be better served by future leaders.



2007-Ali Azizi (<http://www.stennis.gov/programs/stennis-student-congress/43-harold-keller-public-service-leadership-award?start=7>)

2008-Tamara Serwer Caldas (<http://www.stennis.gov/programs/stennis-student-congress/43-harold-keller-public-service-leadership-award?start=6>)

2009-Joshua Segall (<http://www.stennis.gov/programs/stennis-student-congress/43-harold-keller-public-service-leadership-award?start=5>)

2010-Governor Mark Parkinson (<http://www.stennis.gov/programs/stennis-student-congress/43-harold-keller-public-service-leadership-award?start=4>)

2011-Ryan Mulholland (<http://www.stennis.gov/programs/stennis-student-congress/43-harold-keller-public-service-leadership-award?start=3>)