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Friendship and Growth: Not Up for Debate  
At the intersection of friendship and partnership.

A drumbeat of quickened heartbeats and a chorus of nervous chatter fill the hallways as students in ill-fitting suits crowd the campus. Fueled by coffee and competition, the students give practice speeches to walls and frantically rustle through papers as they prepare to face off in front of judges in a competition they've spent weeks preparing for.

While many students sacrifice time with friends for research and public speaking skills, two students found friendship within the competitive environment of Speech and Debate. Speech and Debate partners Aman Shah and Kaavya Butaney, juniors at Los Altos High School, are showing the MVLA community how a Speech and Debate partnership is an opportunity for personal growth and friendship.

December 2019, day 2 of the Santa Clara University Tournament: Kaavya had woken up feeling sick. "Uncomfortably sick", she noted. An hour before they were due to compete, Kaavya found herself broken down in a bathroom stall, her meager breakfast flushed down the toilet beside her. Outside the bathroom, dress shoes rapidly clacked in the halls and panicked voices bled together as students spoke at a pace unintelligible to non-debaters. Tears met the tile floor as Kaavya hunched in the stall, her friends on the other side of the door urging her to just go home.

"Just go home Kaavya." Kaavya had emerged from the bathroom and was met with her partner, Aman. "I'll take care of it, go home," he pushed. Whether it was stubbornness or unshakeable dedication, Kaavya would not go home.

“Admittedly, I didn't have much faith in him,” Kaavya disclosed. “And I decided, no, I'm was gonna be fine. But he was willing to Mav for me. Even though I wasn't properly sick, I was only like mildly sick.” (‘Mav’ refers to ‘Maverick’, a single debater in a two-person event) Touched by Aman’s willingness to face the tournament alone, the pair pushed through the tournament together—Kaavya on an empty stomach.

Before becoming partners, Aman and Kaavya had vastly different introductions to debate. Aman had started his debate career in sixth grade, intrigued by the research component as well as the prospect of arguing. He eventually quit in seventh grade. “It was just really lonely — and there wasn’t much of a team format” (Shah).

Kaavya was lured into debate by peer pressure and a Speech and Debate propaganda poster.

In the end, they both found themselves drawn to Public Forum Debate, a form of debate “designed to enable debaters to discuss current events in an accessible, conversational format” (Hannan). This form of debate has a partner format in which the two speakers alternate speeches—this allows for students to work together as partners, as they are given a month to prepare before competing.

Kaavya and Aman became partners entirely by chance. How they became partners is Kaavya’s self-acclaimed “favorite story to tell about Aman because it's very embarrassing.” Aman was originally meant to be partners with one of his friends, but was abandoned by this friend three hours before their first debate practice—leaving him partnerless. Consequently, Kaavya was also in the market for a debate partner. Having limited options, they became partners. “I was his rebound,” remarked Kaavya. “I'm not sure why I agreed to be partners with him, but I don't regret it”. “We both had no idea how public forum worked, so we kind of just

learned together how to work with each other” (Shah). Over the course of the next three years, they would go from reluctant partners to the closest of friends and experienced debaters.

For many students, Speech and Debate is a journey of finding one’s voice and developing the skills and courage necessary to speak in front of judges. On top of this, students find the skills they develop in debate helpful in anything from applying to college to applying to jobs. Some students can go from not being able to muster the courage to asking for ketchup to being “the kid up at the whiteboard; the kid leading discussions; and the kid standing up for [their] beliefs” (Sawyer). For Kaavya and Aman, their partnership allowed them to learn and grow together.

“Being debate partners with someone is very different to being friends with them because you're not just friends with them. You have to rely on them to do their work, you have to rely on them to be there for you—not just like friends in a friendship way—but in a very argumentative, evidence-based way. And you need to have that communication and that understanding” explained Kaavya. When asked her opinion on negative traits that Aman brings to the partnership, she easily rattled off qualities that aren’t reflected in an average friendship. Despite this, Kaavya and Aman balance each other out through unconditional support and sometimes brutal honesty. “It's a very yin and yang relationship because one of us will always compensate for the other in a certain way” (Butaney).

In Kaavya’s room, walls decked with posters and shelves lined with books, lives an inconspicuous bag. Upon a glance, the bag is mundane and unintriguing, looking like any other bag. What is inside the bag appears just as boring (or even more boring) than the dull exterior: countless papers crammed with handwriting unintelligible to the untrained eye. What this sack of

papers and smudged graphite represents is months of work and preparation. Nights before tournaments pass by quickly with four-hour video calls discussing last-minute preparations.

“Kaavya and I in terms of our personal prep are pretty split,” expressed Aman. “But in terms of preparation that we do for the whole team as a group, Kaavya puts in a lot more effort.” In Speech and Debate, preparation for tournaments is not only done between partners but is also collaborated on by the whole club. “There’ll always be some people who do more: some people doing less—me doing more,” explained Kaavya annoyedly. While Kaavya and Aman are both occasionally irritated by every little thing each of them does, they are always able to take a step back and be supportive of each other. “The thing about Aman is that Aman and I can not talk for two weeks, and then just be completely fine afterward” (Butaney).

Aman and Kaavya have one final year together as debate partners—but it’s undebatable that their friendship will last outside of Speech and Debate. Through being debate partners, the pair has not only grown individually but has also cultivated a friendship that withstands the frustration and occasional yelling that comes with being Speech and Debate partners. “I have experience doing a debate format without a partner... and having a partner is always helpful, because like when I’m stuck on how to respond to something, Kaavya’s my second brain” expressed Aman.

“I don’t know if it’s coincidence or not, but we ended up being really good friends and really good balances for each other... [and] I think my experience with debate would be very different without [Aman] because he and I are very much like an old married couple,” said Kaavya, laughing. “...And [Aman] is the upcoming Speech and Debate president, so it would be tragic that he wouldn’t be the president because I think he’s going to do a great job.” As president, Aman hopes to preserve an integral part of Speech and Debate—the community. “I’m

trying to introduce more team bonding activities, as well as trying to get more bonding between events. So it's not just like all of the Public Forum kids hanging out together, but it's people who do different types of debate hanging out with each other.” Outside of their partnership, Aman and Kaavya continue to form and strengthen bonds with other partnerships and members of the MVLA Speech and Debate community while preserving their role as the token “old married couple”. As future president of Speech and Debate, Aman will always have Kaavya’s unwavering support and unsolicited advice.

“I think what you should know about debate is that it's a community—and that it's not just a bunch of nerds that are coming in and doing this activity... There are so many different options for you, whether it's speech or debate. And you can have a lot of fun, even if you don't really like the writing or research part. As long as you are willing to put in the time, there's a lot of different opportunities and experiences you can find” (Shah).

Works Cited

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