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## Lawyers boost high school debate series

In five spectator events, students explored criminal justice reform

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Two Chicago law partners who met decades ago on the high school debate scene helped organize a new debate series in five cities this fall.

With the backing of Massey & Gail LLP, the I RESOLVE program was launched this year by the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues as a pilot series aimed at drawing a larger audience to high school debate and allowing students to showcase their arguments on issues important to them.

Originally planned as a live series, the events were moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic — the exhibition for Chicago students was last Wednesday.

Nearly 100 people tuned in for each event online, according to the host organization.

“Debate is not always an audience friendly activity,” said NAUDL Executive Director Rhonda Haynes. “We wanted to provide a window into debate so people could see all the skills involved for these students.”

Massey & Gail founding partners Leonard A. Gail and Jonathan S. Massey first met in high school competing in policy debate continued as friends and rivals through college, where each won national championships.

“Competitive academic debate changed the trajectory of our lives,” Massey and Gail said in a joint statement. “It requires and hones the critical thinking, communication,



Last week, a panel of Chicago attorneys judged an online policy debate exhibition between high school students. Pictured in this screenshot from the virtual I RESOLVE event are Sara Sanchez (top left), national programs and communications manager for the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues, and panelists David T. Ballard (top right), assistant general counsel for JPMorgan Chase; Alejandra Contreras Macias (bottom left), an associate at Massey & Gail; and Sarah M. Padgitt (bottom right), associate general counsel for Baxter International Inc. Zoom screenshot

and collaboration skills critical to us as lawyers and to careers more generally.”

Gail explained that access to debate programs isn’t the same in every community.

“Debate has become a very suburbanized activity,” said Gail, an alumna of Maine East High School in Park Ridge. “It used to be popular in the city high schools, but it can be expensive and over time it died out in the cities.”

The NAUDL was founded in the early 2000s and seeded debate leagues in cities around the country. According to Gail, the effort “quickly ran into trouble when the funds got low.”

Professionals like Massey

and Gail tapped their own networks of debate alumni to help the association. Gail served on the board for more than 10 years.

“Lenny has been instrumental in setting up the program and providing resources to support our partner leagues in 22 cities across the country,” Haynes said.

When Haynes proposed the I RESOLVE series in February, Gail immediately supported the plan and pledged with Massey to sponsor it through their law firm, which has offices in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco.

Each February, high school policy debate students are given a central topic around

which they prepare arguments for the competitive season. In 2020, the issue was “criminal justice reform.”

“Rhonda came up with the idea to make the events publicly viewable events to give the kids a bigger platform, and I thought it was great,” said Gail. “It seemed like a good opportunity for us as a law firm to respond to world events.”

“The topic was announced before the pandemic and before everything happened this summer with the calls for reform,” said Haynes, “But I knew I wanted to do more with this topic immediately because it resonates so personally with our students.”

I RESOLVE held programs in San Jose, Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago and Houston. The series kicked off on Oct. 21 in San Jose. Houston will close the series Monday night.

As part of the exhibitions, four students were selected in each of the host cities — two debaters and two alternates.

Each event featured a panel of judges for the students including accomplished attorneys, judges, community leaders and activists.

The Chicago panel included attorneys David T. Ballard, assistant general counsel for JPMorgan Chase; Alejandra Contreras Macias, an associate at Massey & Gail; and Sarah M. Padgitt, associate

general counsel for Baxter International Inc. in Deerfield.

The event's keynote speaker was Margaret "Maggie" A. Hickey, a partner at Schiff Hardin LLP who serves as the independent monitor to oversee implementation of the multiyear consent decree for the Chicago Police Department.

The judges questioned the students — David Range and Malaika Perkins of Lindblom Math and Science Academy in West Englewood — then moderated the debate. Unlike in a typical high school debate, no winners were selected.

"It was more of an exhibition event," Contreras

explained. "We wanted to highlight conversation over competition with this series."

Contreras said she and the other judges were impressed by the students' speed at which they both presented their arguments and composed their rebuttals and the clarity of their arguments. She singled out one student's "innovative" incorporation of song lyrics into his opening statement to get the audience's attention.

"It's not just about the public speaking portion, which is a useful skill for anyone," Contreras said. "It's also about the critical thinking. They have to come up with rebuttals to their arguments on the spot, and it's a great

thing for kids to be exposed to and engaged in."

According to Haynes, early feedback for the program has been "incredible," and the organization plans to continue the program next year, possibly expanding to other cities with more students.

"I am a policy debate guy through and through," said Gail. "Debate absolutely made my high school and college experience for me and helped me get where I am. To marry something that is so important to you with something philanthropic and pass that experience on to kids that are less well off ... there is no describing how rewarding that is. It is absolutely a labor of love."