



FIRST PERSON

# academic bowl opens new world

*By Tyler DeShaw*

My eyes spring open and I smile unbelievably. I watch people walk past me talking in a language I know, not in a language from which I can only grasp a few words on people's lips. All I can do is stand with my suitcases and watch people communicate and things unfold. I see familiar signs formed by strangers—foreign hands belonging to friendly faces of people I do not know. The hands question, affirm, shout, and joke at each other. I find myself talking, too. We talk like nothing is wrong with the world, our palms intertwining with each other in a sign language embrace.

After years of being a deaf person growing up in the hearing world, I was desperate to submerge myself in the deaf culture I had heard so much about, where everybody knew each other and there was no animosity, where people shared a bond through language. My city, Seattle, Washington, offers deaf teenagers a culture that is insufficient. With our schools so far apart, we could usually only get together for special events. I got along fine with my hearing peers and enjoyed hanging out with them, but I wanted to look beyond my small group of friends and see what the world offers for young deaf people.

When I heard about the Gallaudet Academic Bowl as a freshman in a mainstream program at Roosevelt High School, I jumped at the chance to form a team of deaf peers. In excited preparation, my team practiced weekly. Then it was time to leave for the Western Regional Competition. We knew we were ready academically. What we did not know as we stepped off the plane into the humid California air was that we would be exposed to a rare and, for us, still undiscovered world—a place where there were actually people our age using the same language we do.

*Photos courtesy of Tyler DeShaw*

**Tyler DeShaw**, a Gallaudet University freshman who is considering a double major in Spanish and English, attended Roosevelt High School in Seattle, Washington. After completing his education, DeShaw hopes to live in Spain, learn Spanish Sign Language, and teach English to deaf students—and become a future director of the Gallaudet National Academic Bowl.

**As much as the competition itself, I was anticipating the next chance to look into other people's eyes and talk effortlessly with them.**



**Left:** The author, center, notes that participation in the Academic Bowl helped give him “a better sense of self.”

We arrived in Fremont, home to one of California’s two schools for deaf students, where we would compete against other students from the western United States. We stayed in a hotel with the other students, getting to know each other before the hubbub of the competition started the next day. As my team talked shyly among ourselves in the hotel lobby, we peered at the other students chatting, their signs expressive and eloquent. We quickly became comfortable enough to join conversations, exchanging names and hometown addresses. Throughout the three-day competition, we smiled more and our hands moved more rapidly and clearly. We achieved fourth place that year out of 14 schools, six schools for the deaf and eight mainstreamed programs. This fueled our desire to continue to participate in future competitions.

When I returned home, I realized how much an impact this event had on me. The constant exposure to deaf culture combined with the amount of teamwork involved motivated me to work harder to achieve my goals. I eagerly awaited the start of the school year, gathering our team together again. As much as the competition itself, I was anticipating the next chance to look into other people’s eyes and talk effortlessly with them.

We indeed went to Regional Academic Bowls for the next three years. Our sophomore year we competed at the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind, in Colorado Springs. With the snow flurrying outside, we got third place out of 16 teams and the Sportsmanship Award, which is voted by contestants and coaches for the team that showed the most teamwork, cooperation, and congeniality.

Our junior year, we journeyed to the California School for the Deaf in Riverside. It was a tough competition, and we came in fifth in a field of 16 teams. We also won the Sportsmanship Award for the second consecutive year, and I won the Most Valuable Player, which is awarded through voting by the coaches for the player who shows the most cooperation and academic intellect.

In February 2005, when I was a senior participating in my final year of the Academic Bowl, we went to Ogden, Utah, where the competition was held at the Robert G. Sanderson Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. It was a thrilling contest with arguably the top four teams in the same pool, and we ended up in a three-way tie for first place. We eventually became the Western Regional Champions, which after four



wonderful years was just the cherry on top of a very exciting sundae. We also won the Sportsmanship Award again—for the third year in a row—affirming that we, indeed, worked well together and were friendly toward others. As one of the top two teams from the Western region, we won an all-expenses-paid trip to Gallaudet and had the opportunity to compete for bragging rights as “the smartest deaf Academic Bowl team in the nation.”

I had been to Gallaudet University, the world’s only liberal arts institution of higher learning for deaf and hard of hearing students and the mecca of deaf culture in the United States, only twice. I visited once when I was young and touring with my parents. I visited again when I was 16 and attended a Gallaudet University Undergraduate Open House. Now I would go with my team as a participant in the 2005 Gallaudet

National Academic Bowl.

We flew 2,720 miles to Washington, D.C., landed at Reagan airport, and were greeted by the smiling face of our chaperone, who shuttled us off to the Kellogg Conference Hotel on the Gallaudet University campus, where we would stay for the remainder of the competition.

I was taken aback by the kindness of the people who welcomed us. I was to room with Douglas Baker, a teammate of mine, and we eagerly headed to the elevator to

check out our room. As goodwill tokens, Gallaudet had provided us with a nice outdoorsy backpack, with a t-shirt and treats inside, along with a letter of welcome from Gallaudet president I. King Jordan. Then we went back downstairs and commenced to meet all of our fellow Academic Bowl participants. We would spend the next two days competing and becoming good friends at the same time.

My team knew our toughest competition would be the Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD), which had been to the nationals the previous two years

and, with three seniors on its team, was thirsty for victory. By the end of Monday afternoon, we were tied—both MSD and Roosevelt High had 8 wins and 1 loss. The championship match was widely heralded. Some people cheered for us, predicting that we would be the first team from a mainstream school ever to win it all. Others wanted MSD to keep the “deaf school” streak of wins alive.

I remember what seems like every moment of that last competition. After watching Rachel Manis and her Mountain Lakes High School handily win the match for third place, it was time for our showdown with MSD. I marched up to the right side of the stage, settled in the first chair, and set my paper slips, markers, calculator, and buzzer precisely where I wanted them to be. I remember eyeing Joshua Feldman, MSD’s team leader, conversing with teammates and coaches against a backdrop of Maryland fans. With MSD located about an hour away, many students and parents came to eagerly cheer their team, in contrast to the few individuals, including our parents and relatives, who had come from our home in far away Seattle. Looking at all those Marylanders, we felt like we were up against the home team.

I remember standing up, introducing my name to applause, and sitting down. I was ready to commence my final Academic Bowl match. In the first round, we were ahead, straining to get those extra bonus points, racking our brains for





those lesser-known facts. I remember seeing our team getting wrong answers causing MSD to get ahead of us into the final round. Then it was over. In those last three minutes, I realized that we would lose, and indeed we ultimately achieved second place—not bad when one considers that we had competed

against 75 teams throughout the nation.

I was named Most Outstanding Player, an honor voted by the head coaches. This was a shock to me, for I truly believed that our team was a four-student show. I felt humbled and was barely smiling for the camera when I walked onto the stage to pose with Dr. Jordan and Dr. Jane Fernandes, the university's provost.

Reeling from the weight of the oblong figure in my hand, I turned and waved to my team and my coaches, for they deserved to be on this stage, too.

Today I am finishing my freshman year at Gallaudet University, where every day I encounter familiar faces I remember from the Academic Bowl as



well as new faces of friends I have made here. The Academic Bowl made the transition from mainstream schooling to a “deaf university” much easier, for learning with and from other deaf teens helped me to create a better sense of self. Through the Academic Bowl, I gained confidence in my abilities as a deaf person, and this confidence continues to allow me to succeed in both the deaf and hearing worlds.



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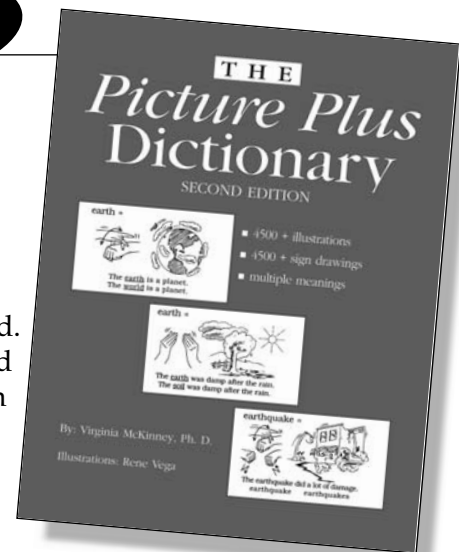
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