

Historic Debates

The story continues

The other day a friend suggested I might like to see *The Great Debaters*, a 2007 film directed by Denzel Washington. My friend said it was based on the true story of the building of a debate team at a small, all-black college in Marshall, Texas which, according to the movie, defeated in 1935 the then-reigning national debate champions of Harvard.



I said I *would* like to see it, mentioning that my father-in-law, Bob O'Brien, had likewise taught at two small black colleges in the South during the 1930s. I said that in addition to being a professor, my father-in-law and my mother-in-law Helen, at that time a communist, were organizers with the Southern Farmers Tenant Union. This was one of the few unions in the 1930s with black and white membership. My parents-in-law would quickly slip away from social gatherings with their black friends whenever they were warned that police were coming. My father-in-law witnessed, after the fact, a lynching.

"Well," my friend said, "I think you'll be interested in this film." He lent it to me, and I watched it, amazed.

In the film, Melvin Tolson, the African-American professor for the Wiley College debate team, becomes controversial when the community of Marshall, Texas, learns that by night the professor is an organizer with the Southern Farmers Tenant Union. He is correctly suspected of being a communist. At one point the debate team is traveling home from a debate and comes across a lynching, and they have to speed away to avoid the still-angry mob. The debate team's youngest, 14 year-old member, provides the clinching argument in the stunning 1935 debate victory.

At the end of the film, a brief postscript provides interesting historical information. The 14-year old debater was James Farmer, Jr., who later founded the Congress of Racial Equality. CORE organized the first student sit-ins and, along with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, organized Freedom Rides into the South. In these rides, blacks and whites sat next to each other on buses and in bus terminals, intentionally violating then-existing transportation segregation laws.

Samantha Brooke, the female member of the Wiley debate team, became a lawyer and was a participant in one of the first Freedom Rides. The debate team's student captain eventually became a minister. The Wiley debate team remained undefeated for ten years. (Inexplicably, the film depicts something that was *not* true: The reigning debate champions defeated by the 1935 Wiley debate team were at University of Southern California, not Harvard.)

Of course, the history presented in *The Great Debaters* makes me wish I could ask my parents-in-law, Bob and Helen O'Brien, to tell more stories of their years with Le Moyne and Talledega College students, and with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. I can't, though, because they both have died.

Fortunately we all have, through the Web (e.g., Wikipedia) or our libraries, the opportunity to expand outwards from a history-based movie such as *The Great Debaters*.

For instance, a quick (and sad) tour through the Wikipedia entry on lynchings documents that not only African-Americans, but also Italian-Americans, Chinese immigrants, white allies of minorities, East Indians, Native Americans, and Mexicans became victims of thousands of lynchings within the U.S. As a result of the civil rights movement, lynchings largely ended in the 1960s.

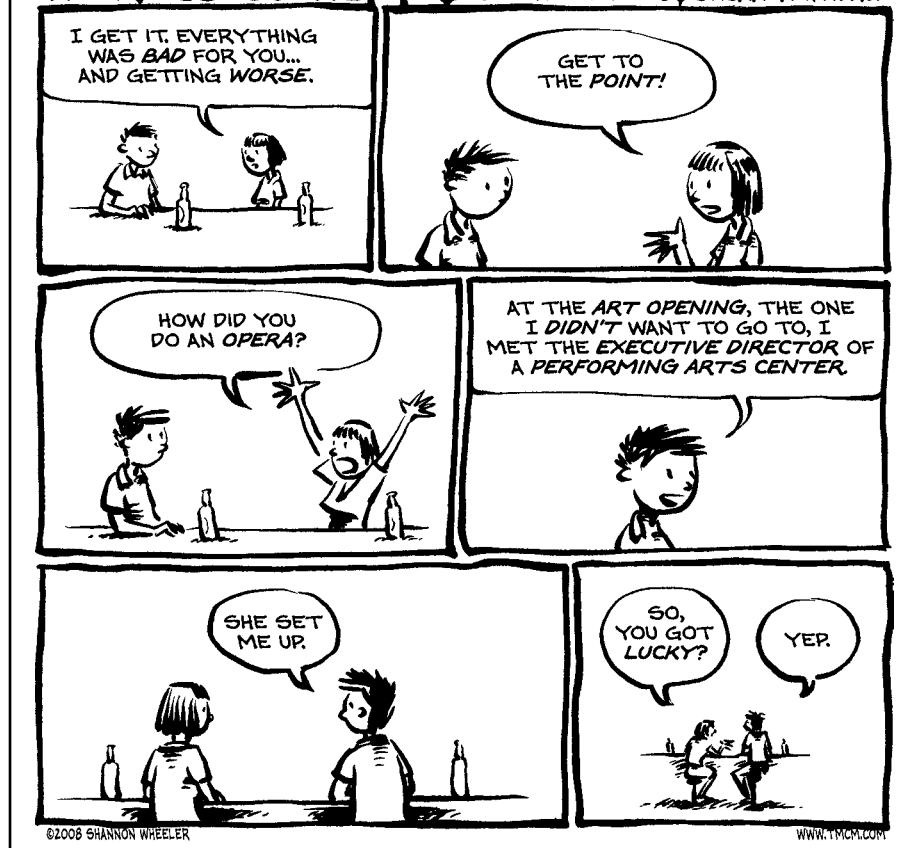
The Wikipedia entry for Wiley debater James Farmer, Jr. reports that he eventually ran for Congress as a Republican in 1968, losing to Democrat Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American woman elected to Congress. Rep. Chisholm was then re-elected for 11 more terms, serving until she retired in 1982.

When I returned the debate film to my friend, a story he told me reminded me that the film's story of courage continues: While hospitalized recently for his seizure and brain tumor, Sen. Ted Kennedy requested two films to view, the funny 2000 film, *Best in Show*, about pet dog shows ... and a 2007 film, *The Great Debaters*.

In the coming months, while Sen. Kennedy undertakes his personal challenge of brain cancer, we will all be witnesses to *another* historic debate between two of his Senate colleagues: Sen. John McCain and, thanks to the courage of people such as professor Tolson in a small black college in the east-Texas town of Marshall, Sen. Barack Obama.

Mary O'Brien of Eugene has worked as a public interest scientist since 1981. She can be reached at mob@efn.org

How to Be Happy (OPERA CONT.) by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SHAME ON EPEA

I can only react with disgust to the home page of the Eugene Police Employee's Association website (www.epea1971.com) where a hateful cartoon of one of Eugene's long serving city councilors was posted accompanied by a countdown clock as to when her "reign of terror" will end. The drawing looks to be a remnant of the hideous "Gang of 9" ads that bring to mind one of the most disgraceful phases of Eugene public and political life. The police, supposedly our public servants, claim to need no citizen oversight. And yet they have apparently authorized a representative to behave in way that hardly befits a mean-spirited middle schooler. These are the public servants with whom we entrust with our lives and safety? It's shocking. If a middle schooler had drawn a hateful cartoon of a fellow student and distributed to his/her friends, he or she would have received stern consequences from the school and from the parents. Who will hold these malicious "adults" accountable? In fact, am I at risk just for writing this letter? On behalf of those EPEA members who actually honor values of compassion, decency and respect, I share your embarrassment. As to those of you who authorized this childish, reprehensible public prank, shame on you. Shame, shame, shame.

*Cheryl Crumbley
Eugene*

CRUDE RED, WHITE AND BLUES

I don't have any sympathy for all you fast food eatin', SUV drivin', Costco shoppin', sprawl lovin' folks complaining about "high" gas prices. You haven't seen anything yet, you AM radio lovin', Starbucks drinkin', debt and waistband heavy Americans. The very lifestyle you hold so red white and blue is based fundamentally on black. Crude? Yes I am, but I'm talking about oil. Your food, clothes, trips to grandma in the Midwest, silky panties, vitamin supplements: All consumer products are linked some way to black gold.

*Chris Krell
Portland*

Good luck! Maybe it's time to burn off that high fructose, partially hydrogenated belly and get your ass on a bike.

I know this may seem harsh, and I apologize. We are entering a crucial time in which our personal hypocrisies must be fundamentally and intently broken down.

*Greg Craigers
Eugene*

SERIOUS TYPO

Your recent article "Climate Apocalypse: Euglena Academy educates on global warming" by Eva Sylwester erroneously states that "James Lovelock, an independent British scientist Fuller frequently quoted, has predicted that Earth's human population will drop to less than one billion by 2010." The correct date in the original quote by Mr. Lovelock was 2100.

I know Fuller and have attended his courses, and the information he has to share is both enlightening and extremely sobering. The body of scientific data to support his positions at this point is simply staggering and is simply not being addressed to the needed extent by any mainstream academic or media establishment. This unfortunate typo paints Euglena Academy in an unflattering and inaccurate light, and considering Fuller's decades-long commitment to the study of this extremely timely body of information and his important public service in teaching others about it, it deserves a prominent correction.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Corrections in our News Briefs section. Our Internet version of the story has been fixed.

A GOOD REVIEW

My grandmother, active in community theater her whole life, disparaged newspaper critics as frustrated artists who channeled their own personal disappointment into