

Victor Finkel - a world debating crown



Victor Finkel (OW2004), who recently won the World Debating championships in Botswana, has demonstrated an extraordinary range of diverse achievements since leaving school, crowned by his triumph earlier this year in the

hot-house of world university debating. We talk a lot about diversity at Wesley, about igniting passion, and Victor has exemplified this in his post-school approach to life generally.

Head Prefect at St Kilda Road in 2004, Victor was an accomplished scholar and musician, loving both the rational and the artistic in equal measure. An outstanding trumpeter with the Big Band, a fine actor with the Adamson Theatre Company, Victor was also at home in the more abstruse world of integral calculus and quantum physics. He was also, not unexpectedly, a fine debater, which is where this story has its origins. Like many Wesley graduates, he was keen to give something back to the school, and from 2005-7 he coached Wesley debating teams, making his own contribution to the rich debating culture established by long-time English and Literature guru, Victoria Thau, a culture which over the years has been such an important component of the intellectual life of the school. Victor was also coached by that other stalwart of Wesley oratory, David Graham, and he learned much about his own technique through coaching others, passing on the skills acquired in his time at school. In 2007, he coached the Wesley team that won the State Championships (a team which, by the way, included another eminent Wesley debater, James Wilson).

Victor was by now at Monash University, taking a degree in music. He could have done anything, but interestingly chose to pursue his first love (it had unexpected spin-offs too, and he got to tour Australia as the trumpeter with pop star Pete Murray's band. It pays to take risks, follow instincts). But by the beginning of 2008, his music degree under his belt, he was faced with a dilemma, and changed academic tack. Using a whole other part of the brain, he enrolled to study for a Bachelor of Aerospace Engineering, following impulses he knew he would always be required to at some stage or other. This, of course, also meant buying more time to pursue his burgeoning love of the spoken arts, and presented an opportunity to develop further the rational, scientific self, dormant but never entirely neglected. It is also possible to view this decision as crucial in a honing of those skills which led to the success on the international debating scene we are now so rightly celebrating.

2008-10, when Victor was working on his engineering degree, are the years when he really came into his own as a potential debating champion. There are some spectacular if somewhat irksome moments, including a loss in 2008 in the Open University world championships to the Oxford team (two apparently articulate PhDs); a defeat by the "poms" in any field is aggravating. But he managed a *Best Speaker* award in the 2010 Australian championships, and was clearly ready for the next big step. This arrived when he teamed up with his new debating partner, Fiona Prowse, for a win in the Cambridge inter-varsity as a prelude to the most prestigious event on the debating calendar: the World University Championships, involving 350 teams from 200 universities across 60 countries. It is hard to imagine even getting to the final, let alone winning it, but this is exactly what he and Fiona did, prevailing against Oxford, London School of Economics, and Sydney University. And to cap things off, there was the individual award for Victor as *Best Speaker* of the World Championships, though characteristically he ranks this second to the team win.



Victor generously and sincerely credits Wesley with urging him to follow often divergent paths, and to engage passionately with a variety of experiences. That may well be, but he brought the talent and the drive to the equation, and his success is a remarkable story of his own initiative, faith and energy. The school is as proud of Victor's success as he is, and he represents so much of the best of what we do. He is a young man refusing to stand still for a moment. By the time you read this, he will have returned from Canada with a level three Ski Instructor's qualification. Handy, in case the market for aerospace engineers who speak impressively dries up.