

# VISTA: Middle-schoolers learn the art of debate



*Vista Magnet Middle School seventh-graders John Paul Mears and Eileen Jones debate at a recent fundraiser for the campus' speech and debate team. (Courtesy Photo)*

By STACY BRANDT - Staff Writer – Published 12/8/08

VISTA ---- Which flavor of ice cream is better, chocolate or raspberry? Which makes a better pet, dogs or cats?

A group of sixth- and seventh-graders at Vista Magnet Middle School are tackling those questions and more as part of the school's new speech and debate team.

Though the teams are a fixture of college and high school campuses, they're rare at the middle school level.

Because of this, the dozen or so students in the program don't really have any other teams to debate.

That's all right, they said. They're happy learning the ropes by debating each other.

Margaret Jacobsen, an English teacher who oversees the club, said she decided to start out with more light-hearted topics about favorite video games or Beatles songs so the students can learn the basics of public speaking and debating before moving onto more controversial topics.

That wasn't always easy, Jacobsen said, since the team really started to get going while one of the most talked-about elections in recent history was raging.

"The kids were coming in and wanting to debate really controversial issues like Prop. 8," she said. "I really thought I needed to train them on being appropriate and respectful before we went into anything like that."

Still, Jacobsen took advantage of the election season by asking students to watch the presidential debates and take notes on how the candidates interacted.

"Some of the students came in and said, 'Mrs. Jacobsen, they were laughing when the other person was talking, and you told us that wasn't very polite,' " she remembered with a laugh.

John Paul Mears, a seventh-grader, wanted to start the team to share his love for debate and politics with other students.

"I definitely think that the students are learning a lot about how to speak in front of crowds," he said. "They're losing their stage fright."

John Paul has no stage fright. In fact, the assertive young man isn't shy about announcing his plans to be president someday ---- sometime around his 53rd birthday, he estimated. He said he plans to start out as a lawyer, then move onto a city council seat and the governor's mansion before running for president.

The students meet with Jacobsen every Thursday during their lunch break.

Amanda Baier, a sixth-grader on the team, said the meetings have been an eye-opening experience.

"I really thought debate was very boring," she said. "I've seen now that it's way more important than you think."

Middle school is a perfect time for students to begin lessons on debating and public speaking, Jacobsen said, because at that age, they're still developing important communication and social skills that will stick with them for the rest of their lives.

Principal Jose Villarreal said he encourages students such as John Paul to take ownership of the clubs and activities at the school as a way to encourage them to become more involved.

Eventually, Villarreal said he would like to see the debate team grow and compete against other schools, even if it has to be against high school students.

"I don't want this to be a club," he said. "I want this to be a team."

Contact staff writer Stacy Brandt at (760) 901-4009 or [sbrandt@nctimes.com](mailto:sbrandt@nctimes.com).