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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEREK PALMER AND
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NO DEBATING IT:

EMERSON FORENSICS IS A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH

Emerson students
have a long history
of excelling
in the art of debate

At the Pi Kappa Delta national debate tournament last spring, five Emerson students—all of them brand new to competitive debate—won first place in multiple categories against 500 students from other colleges and universities. “To start a season completely new to the activity and then win a national title is amazing,” said Deion Hawkins, assistant professor of communication studies and director of forensics.

“Of the four schools I have coached at, Emerson is by far the place where students have the natural talent and are fearless

enough to say, ‘You know what, I am wild enough to actually give this a try,’” he said.

While this year’s team may be new to the activity, forensics—which is the academic term for public discussion and debate—is certainly not new to Emerson. Alternately called the Debating Society, the Debate Council, the Debate Club, and now Emerson Forensics, the organization has undergone many iterations and a few hiatuses throughout the years, but its legacy and reputation for thriving in competitions, and its aptitude for making comebacks, remain unchanged.

A TRADITION OF ORATORY

One can't help but think that debate is part of what Charles Wesley Emerson had in mind when he founded the College as a "school of oratory" in 1880. An old Emerson yearbook cites 1948 as the inception of the debate team, but it began in earnest in 1949–1950 when it started competing, "beating [the] Army three times, to say nothing of B.U., Harvard, and Dartmouth." The team competed in tournaments at the University of Vermont, Tufts University, and MIT.

In 1951, Professor of Speech Coleman Bender took on the role of debate team coach. Under the guidance of Bender and his fellow professor Haig der Marderosian '54, MS '56, the Emerson debate team quickly became one of the best in the country. The debate team would also regularly compete against teams of incarcerated men at Norfolk Prison with the goal of helping them prepare for life post-release. The spirit of democratizing access to education for marginalized people lives on today through the Emerson Prison Initiative. (See sidebar on opposite page for more on the Norfolk Prison debates.)

For decades, the team maintained its status as a fierce competitor, earning it invitations to both regional and national competitions. Today, rows upon rows of trophies earned in competitions from the 1950s through the 1970s can be found lining shelves in the Walker Building.

A SPACE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Hawkins came to Emerson in 2018 and was immediately struck by students' passion for social justice. Hawkins, who started debating competitively when he was 13, said forensics is oriented toward social justice. "It is a place where all folks are welcome," he said. "[As someone with] two marginalized identities—being a Black gay man—I felt at home [and] accepted. My differences were celebrated."

Last fall, Hawkins received the National Council of Pi Kappa Delta's Bob Derryberry Award, which recognizes excellence among intercollegiate forensics educators who have been teaching for five years or less. As one of the few Black directors in the country, Hawkins said he hopes he will encourage other coaches of color to see themselves in forensics.

"The team here at Emerson is very



collaborative and I think that that's kind of the team culture I strive to establish—recognizing that we're all here to learn from each other. Together we are more likely to have solid points," he said.

Hawkins cites this variety of perspectives and viewpoints as a major strength of the Forensics team. The students come from diverse majors, including Writing, Literature and Publishing; Performing Arts; Political Communication; Marketing Communications; and Visual and Media Arts; as well as students from the Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies. "I tell students: if you do speech and debate well in college, you will learn the essential skill of time management," he said.

Emerson Forensics team member and Political Communication major Sara Hathaway '22 said Hawkins inspires students to believe in themselves. "I have learned that my voice is powerful," she said, "and I am capable of using my voice to enact change."

THE FUTURE OF FORENSICS

Since winning the tournament last year, Emerson Forensics has been busy, and it seems the members are only getting started. This past spring, they traveled to Charlotte, NC; Queens, NY; and Milwaukee, WI. They also were invited



◆ Sara Hathaway '22, Jack Degnan '22, Jenna Dewji '22, and Karthik Ramaswami '22 joined Emerson Forensics last year as first-year students.

EMERSON AND THE NORFOLK PRISON DEBATES

By Jennifer P. Williams



📍 Karthik Ramaswami '22 (pictured above); Melanie Lau '22 (pictured page 26)

to participate in a tournament with the International Forensics Association, held in Tokyo—and were planning to attend—but the trip was canceled following the global pandemic caused by COVID-19.

Hawkins has big goals for the future of the team. In addition to new initiatives such as working with the Emerson Prison Initiative, he hopes to keep growing the team and wants to see Emerson place in the top 25 at the main national tournaments.

Beyond winning tournaments, though, what Hawkins hopes his students take away from debating is the experience, and the spirit of collaboration. “What I loved about last year’s [competition] is that even though [not everyone won] an individual national title, they were thrilled that their teammates were able to excel and succeed. When students were eliminated, they were more than happy to come back and help their teammates prep. As I told them, that matters more than any of the trophies...those are the things you’re going to remember. Those are the life skills that matter.” **E**

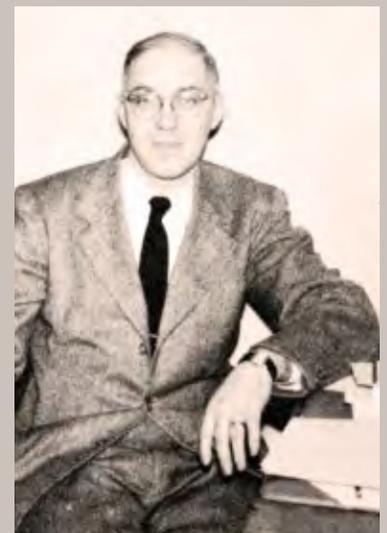
Soon after arriving at Emerson in 1951, Professor of Speech Coleman Bender was approached by staff at Norfolk Prison about coaching its debate team, which was inactive at the time. The prison opened in 1931 under the leadership of superintendent Howard B. Gill, who sought to rehabilitate, reform, and educate inmates rather than simply incarcerate them. One innovation that the prison initiated in the early 1930s was a debate team to help inmates develop their critical thinking and oratory skills. Malcolm X, a former inmate at Norfolk Prison, was on the team during the late 1940s and credited his significant public speaking and debating skills to his participation in it.

Bender accepted the invitation and he and professor Haig der Marderosian '54, MS '56, rebuilt the Norfolk Prison debate team. The two professors worked tirelessly with the team to choose topics, develop pro and con arguments, and improve the participants' analytical and public speaking skills. Since the team

members could not leave the prison, they invited noteworthy teams from such schools as Emerson, Harvard, and MIT to visit them for competitions. The result was a stunning record of 268 wins to 6 losses over a 23-year period and constant inquiries from other teams about participating in new competitions.

The collaboration with Norfolk Prison ended in the late 1970s, but the College created a new partnership with prisons in 2017, the Emerson Prison Initiative (EPI). This endeavor focuses on offering educational courses to inmates in Massachusetts prisons that are similar to those available on Emerson's Boston campus, offering a new pathway to a bachelor's degree for incarcerated students. In November, an exhibit titled *Disrupting Mass Incarceration: Six Decades of Emerson Prison Education* was on view at the Iwasaki Library.

For more information about EPI, visit epi.emerson.edu.



📍 Professor Haig der Marderosian '54, MS '56 (left) and Professor Coleman Bender (right)