

Welcome to Winning Words: Verbal Arts for Democratic Practice!

Inspired in part by the urban policy debate model of the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, Winning Words represents an adaptation and expansion of afterschool debate programs for purposes of getting younger (middleschool) students directly involved in engaging and academically rewarding activities--activities that will help these students get on the college track. Unlike many other afterschool programs, Winning Words provides a long-term program that is both exciting for younger students and academically meaningful, developing speaking, writing, reading, and critical thinking skills that will benefit them in all of their future studies. With Winning Words, middle school students are given the opportunity to learn from and be mentored by some of the most successful college students in the world--those at the University of Chicago. The University of Chicago students are specially trained to bring the Winning Words program to younger students who have often been at a disadvantage, educationally. And those younger students are also brought to the University of Chicago campus in Hyde Park for some special activities to inspire them with a vision of what college can be. Among other things, they get a chance to compete in a full-scale debate tournament, and to present their dramatic productions. Please help us spread the word about Winning Words! We welcome your participation!

Why are the verbal arts so important? How can this exposure to such areas of the humanities as philosophy, public speaking, and creative writing contribute to a young person's life? Just consider some of the heroes of the hit movie *The Great Debaters*, which told the story Wiley College's famous professor Melvin B. Tolson, who mentored such legends of the civil rights movement as CORE founder James Farmer.

Langston Hughes wrote "Melvin Tolson is the most famous Negro professor in the Southwest. Students all over that part of the world speak of him, revere him, remember him and love him." The assessment of Langston Hughes was not without warrant. Melvin Tolson was a courageous leader, social activist, poet, professor, intellectual and pioneer of debate and political argumentation.

In 1924, Melvin Tolson accepted a position as instructor of English and speech at Wiley College. While at Wiley, he taught, wrote poetry and novels, coached football and directed plays. Tolson coached the Wiley Debate Team, which established a ten-year winning streak. In 1935, he led the Wiley Debate Team to the national championship, breaking racial barriers and defeating the University of Southern California before an audience of eleven hundred people. He once said to his student Farmer: "Above and beyond the class assignments, you're going to read and study and dig. Finish War and Peace and then go on to his [Tolstoy's] other works. Then I want you to tackle Darwin, Freud, and Marx. Don't just taste them; chew them and digest them. Then we'll get together and argue about them. I'll take a devil's advocate position, and you defend your views. That's the way though sharpen your tools--in the clash of opposing views." (See James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart* [Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1985]).

Tolson was not merely an academic professor with an interest in extra-curricular debate; he was also a social activist and visionary. His social and civic work also led him to transcend the entrenched racial barriers to organise sharecroppers in the south of Texas.

Today, Winning Words: Verbal Arts for Democratic Practice is proud to work to continue Tolson's inspired project. The Winning Words program actively encourages middle school students in Chicago Public Schools to learn and utilise reading, writing and other tools for civic participation through speech, debate and theatre classes and competitions, expanding both their own horizons and the possibilities of civic friendship.