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Zheng, Acalanes head to Speech Nationals for first time

By Casey Scheiner



Acalanes High School freshman Andrew Zheng
Photo Casey Scheiner

topics and current events around the world."

Eighty-three years after its founding, Acalanes notched a new "first" this year, with freshman Andrew Zheng qualifying to the National Speech and Debate Association's (NSDA) National Tournament in Phoenix this June, becoming the first Don to make nationals.

Zheng did not take an easy route to the nationals by any means, opting to select International Extemporaneous Speaking (IX) as his primary event.

"IX is a spontaneous event where competitors have 30 minutes to prepare a 7-minute speech on a global current events topic," Michelle Giovinazzo, a state finalist in IX from Miramonte, said. "It's not as fun as National Extemp where you get to talk about domestic topics, but it too requires quick thinking, research skills, and good delivery, making it a very challenging event."

In spite of these clear challenges raised by the impromptu nature of IX and the broad base of knowledge it demands, Zheng faced the event and all of its tribulations head on.

"I started doing speech and debate since I've always been interested in public speaking and learning more about current events," Zheng said. "That's also why I chose to do IX as my event since I thought it'd be a great opportunity to learn more about a broad variety of

Many students interested in speech and debate can simply join their school's team and get started competing. For Zheng, the process was not so simple.

"Acalanes didn't have a speech and debate program so I started one so that I'd be able to compete," he said. "Starting a club from scratch has been a great opportunity to learn about running an organization and building a community."

However, after months of tirelessly working to organize a high school speech program, the hard work finally paid off for Zheng, culminating at the Last Chance Qualifier, an online tournament in late April constituting a final opportunity to punch a ticket to Phoenix for the National Tournament.

"It was definitely a very different experience since it was my first time competing in an online format. For example, a lot of delays happened because of technical issues, which was predictable, but looking back it was a valuable experience," Zheng said.

In spite of any technical difficulties, he still notched a spot in the National Tournament, proving the Last Chance Qualifier a worthwhile endeavor.

Through his dedication and hard work, Zheng has won praise not only from his judges, but from his fellow speakers.

"Qualifying to nationals in a competitor's first year of extemp is a big accomplishment and Andrew should be proud," Giovinazzo said.

As a result of his appreciation from and bonds with other speakers, in addition to the competitive elements of the tournament, Zheng is looking forward to deepening those friendships when he travels to Phoenix this month.

"It's been great to meet competitors from other schools and it's been refreshing to find that people have very different goals and interests but are still united by a passion for public speaking. As someone who competes for a small program, the speech and debate community has been incredibly welcoming and I've made many close friends through this activity already," he said. "I think nationals is a really unique opportunity to meet people from around the country with different backgrounds and experiences and I'm

really looking forward to Phoenix."

Additionally, as he heads to Phoenix for the National Tournament, Zheng appreciates the sheer remarkability of what he's done already as a freshman.

"I'm super excited for nationals! I started this year watching people at nationals as a way to learn, so I never could have imagined competing less than a year later. Knowing that I'll be competing with the best speakers out there is incredibly motivating," Zheng concluded.

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[back](#)

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