

## UDLS FEATURE TODAY'S "GREAT DEBATERS"

### The Weinstein Company Film: "The Great Debaters"

The NAUDL joined forces with The Weinstein Company in cross-promotional efforts concerning a new film that was released this holiday season called *The Great Debaters*. The film has been nominated for a Golden Globe award in the category "Best Picture, Drama."

Inspired by a true story, the film features Academy Award winners Denzel Washington and Forest Whitaker. Washington, who also directed, plays Professor Melvin Tolson, the debate coach at Wiley College, a historically Black institution in East Texas. Set in 1935, the film culminates in Tolson's debate team receiving a groundbreaking invitation to compete against Harvard University's national championship debate team.

The film shows how debate has tremendous potential to effect positive change, not only in the lives of young people, but the broader society as well. This message is embedded in the work of the NAUDL.



### The NAUDL's Promotional Efforts

While the film depicts debaters from more than 70 years ago, the NAUDL's interest is promoting the "great debaters" of today who compete in the Urban Debate Leagues across the country. As part of these efforts, over 24 cities hosted advance screenings of the film. The Weinstein Company worked with the NAUDL to provide passes to these screenings in cities nationwide.

All in all, the NAUDL worked to create an urban debate presence at over 38 screenings around the country. The audiences included school and school system leaders, teachers, civic and business leaders, education policy makers, foundation professionals, urban debate supporters, and, of course, debaters themselves.

In five cities the NAUDL hosted pre-release screenings that were attended by the young actors from the film -- Nate Parker, Junee Smollett, and Denzel Whitaker -- that included Q&A sessions afterwards. Miami-Dade UDL Executive Director Barbara Garrett hosted the first event, which drew crowds of UDL students, teachers, and supporters. In Oakland, the screening drew supporters of the efforts to launch a Bay Area Urban Debate League. The young actors also visited Balboa High School -- an event covered by the San Francisco Chronicle. In Chicago, local

radio disk jockey, Bonnie De Shong, moderated a conversation between the audience and the actors. In Washington DC, a Red Carpet event at Lincoln Theater included guests of the NAUDL and coach Melvin Tolson's family. In Atlanta, the National Debate Project and Atlanta Urban Debate League, represented by James Roland and Melissa Wade of Emory University, hosted the screening and subsequent meet and greet. Atlanta UDL students presented actors with medals for their "outstanding performance" and engraved clocks that read "From one great debater, to another."

### Local News Tie-Ins

The publicity surrounding "*The Great Debaters*" has helped generate national press coverage for local Leagues. Students from the Jersey Urban Debate League and the IMPACT Coalition appeared on BET's 106 and Park with Denzel Washington and other cast members from the film. In Chicago, Fox News anchor Robin Robinson, did a segment spotlighting the success of Harlan High School debate team and the Chicago UDL. The Kansas City Star ran a story praising DEBATE-Kansas City and discussing the reactions of its debaters to the film. USA Today ran an article from law professor Erwin Chemerinsky advocating greater public spending on urban debate.

### UDL Debater in TGD: Voltaire Rico Sterling

One of today's great debaters is Voltaire Rico Sterling, who was raised on the South Side of Chicago, attended Whitney Young Magnet School, and debated there in 1995 and 1996. Voltaire attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, and earned a law degree at Harvard Law School, where he was the first black Class President and Commencement Speaker.

Voltaire, commenting on debate's role in his subsequent academic success, says: "My high school debate experience taught me to be a disciplined student, and it made me comfortable being critical of ideas that do not sit well with me." Realizing that acting was his true calling, Voltaire was handpicked by Denzel Washington who cast him -- in a true art-imitating-life moment -- for a role in *The Great Debaters*.