

# Student of the Year Spotlight



by Taylor Walker

*The room is still. Finalists align themselves and adjust their clothing before embarking on their final walk. Nervousness fills the air. I take one last deep breath as I walk toward the middle of the stage, which seems to be miles away. I take my stance and smile, cognizant of the impact of the last four years, and the fact that this is one moment in life I will never forget: taking the stage as a finalist for National Student of the Year.*

The first week of school, freshman year, I along with a group of 30 other students gathered in a classroom, watched videos of national final rounds, and began to hear about the closing ceremony and the awards. I remember thinking that it was impossible for a student in high school to create, perform pieces, and voice cases to that caliber.

I met my high school sweetheart that same week: Dramatic Interpretation. I still picture reading the first of literally hundreds of scripts, composing my first cut, the excitement behind memorizing it, and the innocence of thinking that I literally “broke” something my first

tournament (when, in reality, I made it to finals).

I honestly considered marking forensics as my relationship status on Facebook, for this organization has been my Prince Charming. I thought I was being punked when my coach told me that I was a finalist for NFL National Student of the Year. Receiving the news felt like a proposal, and streams of tears drowned my shirt. Knowing that this honor reflected not only my team, but district as well, caused me to reflect on the journey that got me to this moment.

My transition into high school started off rocky. My single-parent mom was unemployed at the time, and I was entering a high school where I knew no one. I went from attending schools where everyone looked like me to an urban high school with diverse cultures. The pivotal moment—the “ah ha!” moment, to borrow a phrase from NFL alum Oprah Winfrey—was when I entered the classroom of Mario Herrera. He and Lisa Willoughby saw potential in me that I didn’t see in

*“Thank you, NFL, for playing a big part in my daughter’s life and for honoring her commitment to speech and debate by choosing her as 2011 Student of the Year. Her team, her coaches, and her family know that she truly personifies the NFL Code of Honor. She has an incredible passion for service and love for speech and debate. I am humbled that you chose her and believe that NFL will have an awesome year.”*

*~ Zee Walker, NFL Facebook wall post*

myself. My coaches have taken us as lumps of clay and have used in their own manner the right amount of pressure, the right amount of chiseling, the right amount of nurturing, and produced diamonds. That’s how I see my team members and the NFL community. Like diamonds, we shine under pressure.

Although I competed in Policy Debate during my middle school years, learning about high school events was like seeing a puzzle for the first time. I didn’t know exactly where to start. I remember it being the first month of school, and I was challenged to perform a newly memorized piece on slavery in Oral Communication. By the end of the school day, half of the teachers and students in the school knew about the piece, and my love affair with speech was just beginning.

You can’t expect to rise without putting forth effort, and you can’t do everything by yourself. When I joined my school’s forensic team, I was fortunate to develop relationships with more seasoned members. One in particular stands

out: Hannah Mitchell. She unselfishly took me under her wing, teaching me the ropes of the interpretation events, and high school in general. Although, we constantly competed against each other, she always challenged me to do my best.

Joining my school’s forensic team will probably be one of the best decisions I will ever make as it has opened many doors of exploration. I experienced my first plane ride while heading to a Vegas Nationals; I remember trying to hide my fear but hearing a teammate yell “Taylor, your mom told us this is your first flight, you want some gum?” Being a part of the NFL, you learn the importance of trusting your instinct, teammates, and coaches.

I have come full circle. My story is not just about a premature 30 week 3 ounce baby who went on to become named National Student of the Year. It is about my coaches, my teammates, finding that passion which drives you to compete, being challenged by other competitors, embracing your imperfections, and being a member

of the nation’s oldest and largest honor society. Throughout high school, I sought ways to be a voice for those shadowed and silenced. Yet in the midst of my mission, through forensics, I tailored my own voice—and that is my challenge as the NFL National Student of the Year, to help others find their voice. ■



**Taylor Walker** is an alum of Henry W. Grady High School in Atlanta, GA. A four-time state champion and four-year national qualifier, Walker has earned awards in Dramatic Interpretation, Duo Interpretation, Prose, and Poetry. She is now studying Broadcast Journalism at Boston University.