



Richmond Community Schools
300 Hub Etchison Pkwy
Richmond, IN 47374
weRrichmond.com

For Immediate Release

For More Information Contact:
Bridget Hazelbaker, Communication Coordinator, (765) 973-3329

RHS Speakers on the Road to Success

(May 20, 2016 – Richmond, Indiana) On Saturday mornings during the school year, most students find themselves sleeping in after a long week of learning. However, at Richmond High School, one group of students dedicates the earliest parts of their Saturdays (sometimes as early as 4:00am) to compete against students with a similar passion: competitive speaking. This year



Members of the speech team celebrate a top-five finish at the Greensburg Speech Tournament earlier in the

the Richmond High School Speech Team competed in twelve tournaments over the course of the regular season and postseason while racking up a plethora of team and individual achievements.

Under the vision of first-year head coach, Ronnie Swango, the speech team achieved honors that Swango did not see possible at first, including a sixth-place finish in Indiana Class AA. “If you would have asked me if I thought we would place

at State this year, I would have told you it would be highly unlikely,” Swango said, “but these students have worked hard this year and we received a nice-sized trophy to show for it.”

After Swango was named the Indiana High School Forensics Association Coach of the Month last October, Richmond was deemed a future “powerhouse.”

“It’s really a testament to how much these kids put into the season. Even the younger students on our team have bought into the process it takes to be a successful competitor in speech. I am excited for these kids and it was nice to know that other coaches see their incredible talent,” Swango said.

As the season wrapped up, RHS began to rack up milestones, including their first national qualifier, first state finalists, and their first state champion.

At the district tournament, RHS brought a number of students who competed against the strongest speakers in the district for a shot at a National Tournament bid in June. RHS junior, Chithra Vedantam, reached that achievement by placing in the top two in Informative Speaking.

“Chithra’s approach to this competition is unmatched,” Swango said. “She spends hours outside of school preparing and writing speeches that she is passionate about and she deserves every bit of this opportunity. She’s a fantastic speaker.”



Swango (left) and Vedantam (right) celebrate the junior’s qualification for the national tournament

Also competing at the district tournament was freshman Justice Lewis, who made it to district finals and earned a spot as an alternate to nationals. “For her to do that as a freshman is an incredible achievement,” Swango said, “and one that should not be overlooked. Justice, along with our entire freshman class, shows great promise for the future of this program and I know these kids have a hunger to do even better next season.”

But Richmond’s season was not yet finished. There was still one final tournament to compete as a team: the IHSFA State Tournament. The team qualified eight entries to the State tournament - over twice as many as the previous season. Students qualifying for the state tournament

included freshman Aidan Morris, sophomore Christian Sharits, juniors Emma Williams, Sam Croucher, Jenna Wilson (in two events), Chithra Vedantam (also in two events) and senior Kayla Owens.

After a long, strenuous day of students competing against the top forty-eight competitors in their events, RHS had two state finalists: sophomore Christian Sharits and senior Kayla Owens.

Sharits finished his season, placing third in the state in Discussion. Owens would go on to become the first speaker at RHS to win a state tournament.

Owens competed in Dramatic Interpretation, facing the reigning state champion among other national qualifiers and previous state finalists. In the end, Owens won her judges over and was crowned the 2016 State Champion in Dramatic Interpretation. Owens’ selection was from the book *If You Could Hear What I See* by Kathy Buckley, which tells the story of one woman’s obstacles from struggling with a hearing loss to overcoming cancer.



Owens (left) celebrates a state championship in Dramatic Interpretation with Coach Swango (center) and fellow state finalist Christian Sharits (Right).

“She (Owens) already had the sign language down, which was a key part to telling this woman’s story,” Swango said, “and once she matched the sign language with her interpretation, she started to win several tournaments, including Sectionals. Other coaches were bragging on her performance and the judges enjoyed it. She did a great job.”

Owens, along with Sharits and Vedantam, played a key role in the team’s sixth-overall finish in Class AA, placing twelfth overall in the state of Indiana. Swango is convinced, however, that this is only the beginning of a potentially powerful

squad. “We have some incredible young talent on this team and I am really excited about the future of this program. We have Sharits, Vedantam, our strong junior class, and a talented freshmen class all coming back next season. There’s no telling where this team can go.”

Next up for the RHS Speech Team is the National Speech and Debate Association Tournament where junior Chithra Vedantam will travel to Salt Lake City, Utah this June for a chance to be crowned a national champion.

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