

BELIEF IN SUCCESS STARTS WITH A DREAM



by Jay Walker

It was just another September—the start of a new school year (my second year at Robinson Secondary School, in Fairfax County, Va.), and students in our advanced marketing class were sharing their expectations for their senior year. From the back of the room a second-year DECA member proclaimed he was going to make the stage this year at ICDC, and he would bring home a window trophy for the chapter!

Mike had gone to ICDC as a junior, and he was enamored with the excitement and glamour of being in the winners' circle. I responded like a supportive DECA advisor and told him if he worked hard on a written event, it may just happen. What I was really thinking was he did not have a chance at all to win first place in the International Competition.

Unreachable Dream

At that point in my teaching career, I had been in the business of DECA competitions for 19 years, and the best that my prize students had done was achieve top 10 in the nation. Top 10 in the nation is an incredible honor, but first place in the nation seemed like an unreachable dream.

Robinson Secondary had only ever entered one chapter project that made it through State Competition.

Mike—a football player who warmed the bench, annoyed his peers and had not gotten even to the stage

at State—was going to be the first to win an International title? I had to doubt him a little...but just to myself.

At least once a week for the first semester of Mike's senior year in advanced marketing, he would tell the class that he was going onstage at ICDC and would win first place overall. His will and persistence was haunting. In fact, I started to feel compelled to do my part as the teacher/advisor and provide him with the support and guidance he would need.

Picking a Project

Following some discussion, Mike's advanced marketing class decided to undertake the Free Enterprise Chapter Project (now Entrepreneurship Promotional Plan) for their 1994–95 program of work. The managing class selected GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), which was up for vote in the United States Congress. The trade agreement, with 125 other countries, would remove all trade tariffs to encourage global commerce.

The chapter would work with the nonprofit organization Citizens for a Sound Economy, and visit every congressional office on Capitol Hill, leaving material about why the GATT agreement was good for America and free enterprise.

We also planned a rally and press conference on the steps of the U.S. Capitol to further promote the issue before the United States Congress and the public at large. The advanced marketing students planned the activities for our chapter project for a month before deciding we needed to select leadership for the project.

Two students came forward and were interviewed for the position. Yes, one was Mike. He, along with a classmate, Kim, said they wanted the responsibility for the chapter project.

Although I had a state officer in mind that, at the time, I thought would have been a better pick, Kim and Mike were selected as co-directors to guide the 24-member class and chapter of 235 students to take on this enormous project.

Team Work

As a team, we worked many hours under the guidance of an adult advisory committee that included an economist, a Capitol Hill lobbyist and an experienced activist for special interest groups. The adults reviewed the plans for the lobby and helped edit the materials, speeches and promotional items we were to utilize.

Mike and Kim were living the DECA life and becoming real DECA DORKS! They worked late after school organizing the campaign and encouraged 100 Robinson DECA members to become student lobbyists, teaming together to visit the 535 offices of Congress on November 30th of that year. The students traveled to Capitol Hill and spent the day visiting members of Congress, informing them about GATT.

A week later, the agreement was brought before both houses of the U.S. Congress and voted on. The agreement was ratified by Congress, and the Robinson DECA was recognized by President Clinton, CNN and other media outlets for its effort.

Does this story have a happy ending? Did Mike, Kim and the Chapter enter the manual at the State and then the International DECA competitions?

Lessons Learned

The competition aspect was not the most significant component of this story. I want all of you who are reading this article to believe that if you work hard, believe in yourself and come together as a chapter (team), you can move mountains. Remember, this all started with Mike saying to my class in September that he was going onstage at ICDC for a first place award. He repeated this at least once a week until I felt I needed to do my part and give him a chance to make it happen.

Perhaps it is not the ending of this story that is most significant; I believe what's more important were the lessons learned through experience.

This fairy tale story started with a dream of winning an award, but the reality of the students' hard work to

understand the Congressional bill they were promoting and the reality that this bill would become a law was the true success story.

The chapter created a campaign that was validated by an adult advisory committee, and over 100 students dedicated hours of service in and out of class. The winning vision was Mike's, and I often share his story as I start a new school year with my advanced classes.

It Starts With a Dream

I compare competing through DECA to athletic events and academic achievement. If you see yourself making the basket, scoring the winning goal or earning an "A" on your math test, it just may happen.

The belief in success starts with a dream, a statement made in class, writing down a goal, putting yourself in a leadership position. Not every DECA chapter will make the stage this year in Dallas at ICDC. But, the chapter and individual competitors that believe in themselves will be one step closer to their dream of success.

Mike and Kim were called to the stage for first place at the State DECA Conference. This gave them the confidence to work even harder and prepare for International competition.

Keeping the Faith

Hours of work went into Robinson's 1995 Chapter Free Enterprise Project. Students revised, edited and worked to improve the appendix for several weeks after State competition. Mike still kept the faith that he was going onstage, and Kim and her committees of advanced marketing members stayed on task. Focused with desire to be great, and with support from a student teacher and three DECA advisors, the project was ready for International competition.

Sitting in the mini awards ceremony was tough; I rehearsed what I might say to all of the students who put so many hours into the project if it did not place into finals. Moreover, what would I say to Mike? Would knowing

that his leadership and dream led a group of high school students—teenagers—to persuade Congress to pass an international bill into law be enough to satisfy his will to WIN? Sure, it should, but could I convey that to Mike and Kim and the rest of their team back home?

Freeze Frame

The ICDC announcer called out Virginia as a finalist for Free Enterprise, and Mike and Kim ran to the stage. It was their moment, and time seemed to freeze. Hugging, high fives and smiles were called for at the base of the awards stage. I started to think Mike was right, but it would be nearly 12 more hours before anyone would know the final results.

That was May of 1995. This past year at the 2005 ICDC Conference, the belief in making the stage that Mike put into our Chapter was borne out three times over. Robinson DECA sent three teams of three to the stage for their own plastic window.

Our chapter's Entrepreneurship Promotional Plan, Public Relations and Civic Consciousness entries were all selected as first place manuals and presentations! This became our ninth international first-place win.

Did Mike have a vision of good things to come? I think he gave all of us (including one DECA advisor) the confidence that if you want it bad enough and are willing to work hard and put the time in, dreams become realities. ❖

Mr. Walker has been a DECA advisor in Fairfax County Public Schools for 29 years. His chapters at Mt. Vernon H.S. and Robinson Secondary School have consistently placed in State and International DECA Competitive Events since 1977. He has placed over 40 students into state office and served as the Virginia DECA SLC awards ceremony director since 1988. He has served as a district advisor, worked on the policy and planning committee and chaired the Virginia DECA board of trustees. His credits include: producing and directing National DECA's Making The Stage Part I/II, serving on the international DECA scholarship selection committee five years, and presenting competitive events workshops at both state and international conferences.