

# LINDSAY HARRISON: Speak Your Truth and Love What You Do

by Victor Torres III



## A Policy debater in front of the Supreme Court

**O**n January 21, 2009, Lindsay Harrison stood at the podium in the Supreme Court for the first time and delivered her oral argument in a case that could mean life or death for her client. She was not nervous, despite the fact that this Supreme Court appearance was her first argument of any kind in a court, because she had been preparing for this day over many nights and weekends. She won the case in a 7-2 decision.

Lindsay represented Jean Marc Nken in his efforts to obtain asylum in the United States on a pro bono basis. Nken, a citizen of Cameroon, fled the country following government detainment interrogation and beating over his advocacy for free elections. This case set a precedent in

immigration law that asylum seekers have rights and can seek to remain in this country while they have a case on appeal. If the government were to deport an asylum seeker while their case is pending and then they were to win their appeal, it could be very difficult or even impossible for them to return, particularly if their claim was valid because they were at real risk in their home country.

When asked what it was like to argue in front of the Supreme Court, Lindsay responds, “It was a ton of fun. You are very physically close to the Justices, and you feel like you are having a conversation with nine really smart people who are interested in hearing from you and getting the answer right.”

### PRO BONO BEGINNINGS

As an openly gay student at Harvard Law school, Lindsay sought employment with a firm with a commitment to pro bono work and an environment with other openly gay attorneys. Jenner & Block checked both these boxes. She was fortunate enough to work on a big Supreme Court case (*Lawrence v. Texas*) as a summer associate in which Texas state law criminalizing specific sexual conduct between two consenting adults of the same sex was deemed unconstitutional. This case had a massive impact on LGBTQ+ civil rights and Lindsay’s career. It combined progressive work and pro bono work on impactful Supreme Court litigation.

Lindsay explains, “This is kind of how I ended up

where I am—and now, I get to do pro bono work on all sorts of things I am passionate about including criminal justice cases and immigration work, which so frequently impact brown and black people disproportionately and where the system has so many flaws that usually arise because someone does not have adequate representation at some point in the process.”

She has taken on challenges such as death penalty work and work in favor of scientists and government integrity. “I am just really blessed to be able to do pro bono work that’s both personally incredibly fulfilling, especially helping disadvantaged people and minorities,” she says. “At the same time, I get to do a whole bunch of interesting work for companies and other clients who pay for services.”

Lindsay has a large pro bono practice that not only allows her to give back to communities, but also gives those who cannot afford or access it good legal representation.

“Doing some of the immigration work I do pro bono definitely makes it feel like a connection to my family, to my history, in ways that make it more personal than it otherwise would be.”

Lindsay was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. Her mother was born in the United States and her father emigrated to the U.S. in the 1970’s from the Soviet Union. Her grandfather had been a lawyer in the Soviet Union; however, when they moved to the U.S., he had to start over, and he ended up becoming a manager of a grocery store in Dallas. When she decided to be a lawyer, she frequently thought about the fact that her grandfather had been a lawyer and he had given it up. She felt a connection to him and as a result the pro bono work she does today.

### SKILL BUILDING

Lindsay initially competed in Policy Debate because of a school requirement. At the time she had to take a fine arts class and she felt she was terrible at (and terrified of) art and music. Debate happened to be within the fine arts category and was an equivalent credit. She took it and really loved the activity.

Lindsay says, “I stuck with it, partly because I had success, and partly because of Aaron Timmons who was and still is an amazing coach. That’s kind of why that was a factor here, it was the default alternative.” She thought it sounded like a good way to become better at arguing, whether it was in the debate room or arguing with friends or other people.

She learned many transferable skills from the activity but none as valuable as the importance of preparation—the idea that you might be giving a speech and you have eight minutes to deliver it, but you are going to have to do hours and hours of work to maximize those eight minutes.

Lindsay explains, “All the work you put in outside of that is what makes that speech good. It’s not just sparkling talent, it’s all the hard work that goes into it beforehand.”

Speech and debate helped her find her voice and think about what is truly persuasive. It also introduced her to a rather large community of people who are smart, thoughtful, and who she now encounters in her career all the time.

Her guidance and support through debate can be attributed to her role model, Sherry Hall, who was the coach at Harvard and

her lab leader when she was in high school.

“Sherry has been one who works harder than anybody else and also does her best to make everybody else good—whether that’s someone on her team or just someone in the debate community. She’s all about hard work and service to others. If I can emulate even a little bit of that it’d be like I had a successful life and career.”

### ADVICE FOR LAW STUDENTS

To the students participating in speech and debate with an eye to a future career in the legal field, Lindsay recommends starting with the building blocks.

“To me, reading prolifically and writing clearly and efficiently are the two best things you can do to become a really skilled lawyer,” Lindsay says. “When I mean reading, it’s about every topic. Learn about the world. Learn about any topic that interests you. *Curiosity*. That’s a big part of becoming a successful lawyer. Still working on not just your oral persuasive skills but your writing as well.”

She continues, “It’s not enough to just want to be a lawyer; you need to think about what would make you a *happy* lawyer. Think about your career in terms of what part would make you feel fulfilled and happy.

That’s got to be part of your planning. It can’t just be *I want to be a lawyer*. It’s got to be what about being a lawyer would make me feel good about my life, good about my career, so I am very fulfilled.”

Lindsay concludes, “Being thoughtful and purposeful from the start will help you get to a happy place and love what you do.” 

**Victor Torres III** currently serves as a Colorado College Fellow at the NSDA.

### Event Spotlight: POLICY DEBATE

Policy Debate is a two-on-two debate where an affirmative team proposes a plan and the negative team argues why that plan should not be adopted.

#### What’s unique about Policy Debate?

Policy is the oldest debate event and one of the longest, with the typical round running between 90 and 120 minutes, including feedback from judges. It is generally known as the most research-intensive event, as students debate the same topic all year. Unlike traditional writing where the author may briefly quote or even paraphrase evidence, Policy Debate relies on the use of cards, or pieces of evidence directly quoted word-for-word from the source. Depending on local styles, Policy can be a fast-talking event! With strict time limits and the need to present arguments supported by research, students will speak as efficiently as possible.