

The Great Debaters- A movie against prejudices at school



The Great Debaters, the second film by actor Denzel Washington as director. It tells a story of triumph over prejudice and ignorance, based on true events.

In the 1930s, in a small college in Texas, Professor Mel Tolson teaches his students the art of **debate**. Soon, this all-black university forms an invincible team, that goes against the big schools and ... wins.

At that time in America, black students were not welcome on the campuses of major universities. But the team of Prof. Tolson **scores** victory after victory and other Universities can no longer ignore or marginalize it.

Work hard and you can **achieve**. "Do what you've got to do so you can do what you want to do," says Prof Tolson.

Denzel Washington produces and directs the film and plays the role of Tolson. The philosophy of the professor is the same he uses with his own children.

The Wiley College debate team members are unknown young actors with great talent: Nate Parker, Jurnee Smollett and Denzel Whitaker.

"We **set** up a camp for the young actors. I met Dr. Freeman, who is the debating coach at Texas Southern University, one of the top debating schools in the country..." Washington says.

J. Smollett, one of the actors, said that making the film also became a good lesson in living history. "... [in the 1930's]. They knew education was their ticket. ... You were either a **sharecropper** or an educated person. There was no in-between," he says.

In the movie, Denzel Whitaker is the youngest member of the team: teenager James Farmer, Jr.. Farmer later founded 'CORE' - the Congress for Racial Equality - and became a leader of the American civil rights movement.

(Adapted for educational purposes from www.voa.com)

(Photo from bp0.blogger.com)

Reading Comprehension Exercise

Read the text above, then answer the following questions:

1. Where is The Great Debaters set?
2. When does the story take place?
3. What was life like for black students at that time?
4. Which role does Denzel Washington play?
5. Are the other actors in the movie very famous?
6. James Farmer was the youngest member of the debating team. Why did he become famous?
7. Is the story in the film based on true or fictional events?



Are you racist? A quiz

This quiz comes from www.racismnoway.com.au, an Australian website. This activity is designed to see how students can **deal with** racism in the classroom.

If you do the quiz on the Australian website, you can also receive a rating.

Q1

Your class is discussing the contribution of migration. One girl says that migrants don't want to become Australians and don't try to learn English. What do you do?

- a. You are not sure what to think, so you say nothing.
- b. You say that many migrants are proud to make Australia their home and are fluent in English.
- c. You **glare** at her and tell her she's being racist.
- d. You agree with her.

Q2

Your group of friends are talking about the new girl who has come from the Middle East. Fatima is a refugee and she has told the kids at school that she has spent some time in a detention centre. One of your friends **wonders whether Fatima's family are terrorists. What do you do?**

- a. Say that Fatima's family are **refugee,s** not terrorists. So they are victims of terrorism, and are not terrorists.
- b. You agree. You've heard about the violence in detention centres on the news.
- c. You think your friend is ignorant, but you say nothing.
- d. You **roll** your eyes and tell her she's being stupid.

Q3

Your teacher has asked the class to organise a **mock election. Some of your classmates want to put up an anti-immigration candidate. What do you do?**

- a. You refuse to participate in the election while "that candidate" is running.
- b. You say that the class should not **allow** that candidate to participate in the election.
- c. You put up your own candidate and invite the anti-immigration candidate to a debate.
- d. You are not interested in the elections and you don't say anything.

Q4

A football tournament has been organised by the School Council. During a game, players from one team harass Mary, one of your players, because she is black. A fight begins. What do you do?

- a. Nothing. You think racial harassment is just a normal part of sport.
- b. You are only interested in the game.
- c. You get **involved** in the fight. You don't want to miss the fun.
- d. You make sure the **referee** gets the full story.

Q5

In a class discussion on youth crime, one of the students comments that members of youth gangs are always "ethnic". What do you do?

- a. You agree. You have read about it in the paper.
- b. You say nothing.
- c. You say that gang members can come from any background and that media reports are not always correct.

Q6

At lunchtime, a group of girls shout racist remarks to you and your friends. When you report it, the teacher says the girls can express their opinions. What do you do?

- a. Call the teacher a racist and go away.
- b. Say that racial harassment is neither a legal nor acceptable form of free speech.
- c. Think of some clever racist remarks to shout back at the girls next time.
- d. Get a group of friends together and plan to "get" the girls after school.

Q7

In a class discussion on Australian history, the teacher says that families from many different backgrounds such as Greek, Lebanese, Aboriginal and Vietnamese contributed just as much as Australian families. The teacher adds that their cultures are just as valuable as other cultures. Your family has been in Australia for generations, but do not have an English-speaking background. What do you do?

- a. You agree, but add that Australia is made up of many different cultures that can be called Australian.
- b. You say nothing and think that for no matter how many generations your family has lived here, you won't be accepted.
- c. You agree with the teacher.
- d. You disagree with the teacher.

(Adapted for educational purposes from www.racsimnoway.com.au)

(Photo from www.evc.org)

Communication Point

Have you ever dealt with a case of racism at school? Discuss the situations in the quiz with your classmates.

<http://www.zanichellihappening.it>