

A FILM BY VOX POP FILMS IN ASSOCIATION WITH LADY & BIRD FILMS, WORLD OF HA PRODUCTION, THE STEPHEN WOLFE FOUNDATION, THE DENOVO INITIATIVE, THE SCHULTZ FAMILY FOUNDATION & TRUANT PICTURES



SPEAK.



RT | 103 Minutes

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SPEAK.

LOGLINE

Five American teens spend a year crafting spoken word performances with the dream of winning the world's largest and most intense public speaking competition, the NSDA Nationals.

SYNOPSIS

SPEAK follows five of the nation's top teenage speech competitors, capturing the euphoria of victory and the devastation of defeat as they craft and perform original oratories over the course of a 9-month season. Their dream is simple: To win the Super Bowl of public speaking, the NSDA Nationals.

We witness them, their coaches and their parents as they fight to keep school speech programs alive amid budget cuts, book bans and censorship efforts that reach a fevered pitch during the 2024 election year.

We begin at the 2023 National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA) Championships, introducing our eclectic cast of student orators: Noor, Noah, Sam, Mfaz and Esther, the two-time reigning national champion in Oratory. We follow them all the way to the 2024 Nationals where Esther hopes to threepete — and beat the current record holder and *SPEAK*'s Executive Producer, Josh Gad. Other notables include Oprah, Brad Pitt, Ketanji Brown-Jackson and Jordan Peele among others.

We watch these young firebrands rehearse wherever and whenever they can: at family dinners, on the school bus, in front of a beloved pet pig, at church, and, of course, with their coaches and teammates, who are often as close as family. The students have two goals: To change minds, and to take home scholarship money. College admission officers often show up at NSDA tournaments, scouring the event for future recruits. This is the Orators' chance to be seen. And heard.

But no matter how determined and driven they are, they're still teenagers, and we see them in all their youthful glory—hanging out at the mall, dressing up for Taylor Swift concerts, prepping for the prom, managing TikTok fame, navigating complicated family dynamics, receiving college acceptance (or rejection) letters, and falling in love – all while handling the immense pressure of striving for a championship title.

SPEAK captures the passion, joy and courage of unforgettable teens using their voices to change hearts and minds. This film is the perfect antidote for these fraught times in America – intense, funny, and most of all, hopeful.

SPEAK.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Another mass shooting. Unprecedented storms and wildfires. Tragic war plaguing our international communities. And a convicted felon re-elected as President of the United States. These are just some of the issues that keep us up at night.

As a society, we've lost the art of the argument and the effectiveness of the compromise. We've lost our ability to question beyond party lines. We've lost our ability to connect, listen, and understand one another and this loss is creating a mental health crisis.

Is there a way out? Is there an antidote to these fraught times?

Enter the world of competitive speaking- a sport where middle and high school students find their voice while learning to listen to and respect one another. Over the course of a year, students write, practice and hone a powerful 10 minute speech inspired by their own personal and lived experiences, their "heart story." These brave and passionate teens then perform in front of thousands of people in tournaments across the country, touching the hearts and souls of each person they come into contact with.

When we discovered the world of speech in 2019, we too were blown away by these eloquent and passionate teens. Gen Z gets a bad rap these days, but it's time we sit up and listen. Over four years of development and filming, we saw how competitive speaking can shape and motivate young visionaries, no matter what communities they come from and in turn, better all of us who are lucky enough to experience their performances.

We hope our film will ignite conversations and pose the question: Why can't every public school district in America offer a competitive speech program just like they might offer football or soccer? In our deeply divided world that faces historic challenges, these programs foster creative thinking and the open exchange of ideas in an inclusive, fun and competitive environment. They nurture the next generation of leaders, entrepreneurs, artists and judges who may be the bridge to deeper understanding and empathy. They are our future.

SPEAK up. SPEAK out.

SPEAK.

SUBJECT & CREW BIOS

JENNIFER TIEXIERA – DIRECTOR

Jennifer is an award winning documentary director, producer and editor who most recently helmed the Emmy-nominated series, "Unveiled: Surviving La Luz del Mundo" for HBO and the feature length documentary, "Subject," which made its debut at the 2022 TriBeCa Film Festival. In 2020, she completed "P.S. Burn this Letter Please," which debuted at the 2021 TriBeCa Film Festival and won the Audience Award for Documentary Feature at the 2020 OutFest Film Festival.

Previously, she edited "17 Blocks," which was awarded Best Editing in a Documentary Feature Film at the 2019 TriBeCa Film Festival, and other highlights include editing and producing the documentaries, "A Suitable Girl," winner of the Albert Maysles Award at the TriBeCa Film Festival and "Waiting for Hassana," official selection of the Sundance, SXSW, and Toronto Film Festivals

Other career highlights include editing the documentary "Salam Neighbor" and the 2011 SXSW Documentary Grand Jury Winner, "Dragonslayer.

GUY MOSSMAN – CO-DIRECTOR / DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Guy is an American cinematographer and director who made his first short film in 2000 in Paraguay. In 2002, he was awarded a prestigious Park Fellowship at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill to pursue an M.A. in Journalism and Documentary Filmmaking. Since then, Guy has dedicated himself to lensing documentary films, non-fiction television and commercials. His love of character and vérité storytelling, and an eye for light and composition, has been acknowledged by critics and directors alike.

Guy is best known for his dramatic photography on the Oscar short-listed documentary film, *Buck*, which also won the Audience Award at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, *Mariachi High*, *Bending The Arc*, the 2020 Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Award-winning *Feels Good Man*, and Discovery Doc's *The Lost Lincoln* — EP'ed by Mark Wahlberg.

In 2022, Guy co-directed the critically acclaimed documentary *The Human Trial* with his wife, Lisa Hepner. His camera work on *Buck* was singled out in the Los Angeles Times for being 'both beautiful and evocative'; and the LA Times TV critic Robert Lloyd said of

Los Jets, ‘he gives every element its due; the clamor, the quiet, the details of décor and decoration, the richness of the landscape, the look of air under floodlights.’

JOSH GAD – EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Josh is an American actor, singer, and comedian. He is known for voicing Olaf in the “Frozen” franchise, playing Elder Arnold Cunningham in the Broadway musical “The Book of Mormon,” and LeFou in the live-action adaptation of Disney’s “Beauty and the Beast.”

For his role as Olaf, Gad won two Annie Awards, and for his work in “The Book of Mormon,” he received a Grammy Award and a Tony Award nomination for Best Actor in a Musical. In film, Gad has starred in hit films such “Murder on the Orient Express,” “The Wedding Ringer,” and the critically acclaimed “Marshall.”

In television, Gad played a fictionalized version of himself on FX’s “The Comedians” opposite Billy Crystal and currently stars in both Armando Lannuci’s HBO series “Avenue 5” and Apple’s hit animated series “Central Park,” which he co-created with “Bob’s Burgers” Creator Loren Bouchard.

SIMON KILMURRY – EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Simon is a documentary producer and executive producer. He has received a Prime-Time Emmy Award, 17 News & Doc Emmys, and eight Peabody Awards. He is a governor of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, and a member of the Producers Guild of America, and the Television Academy. He served on the board of jurors of the Peabody Awards 2016-22. He is a board member of Jewish Story Partners and an advisor to The Redford Center.

Current productions include: Producer - “Desperate Souls, Dark City and the Legend of Midnight Cowboy” by Nancy Buirski (Venice International Film Festival, Telluride Film Festival 2022); “Finding Seyoum” by Vanessa Tshaye and William Martin; Executive Producer - “My Name is Andrea” by Pratibha Parmar (Tribeca 2022), “El Equipo” by Bernardo Ruiz (PBS 2023); “ADA – My Mother the Architect” by Yael Melamede (2024); and Consulting Producer - “The Human Trial” by Lisa Hepner and Guy Mossman..

From 2007-15 he was the executive producer of “POV”, the PBS showcase of independent documentaries and co-founded the WORLD Channel documentary series “America ReFramed.

HALLEE ADELMAN – EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Hallee is a writer, filmmaker, and co-founder of World of HA Productions. She served as executive producer on the Emmy-winning documentaries “The Social Dilemma” and “Art & Crimes by Crimes,” Oscar-nominated “Writing With Fire,” and 2024 Sundance Festival

Favorite “Daughters.” Hallee directed and produced “Our American Family,” a documentary about one family’s fight against generational addiction amidst the opioid crisis. The film was selected for Deadline’s “For the Love of Docs” screening series by National Geographic. She recently completed a term as a Board member of the International Documentary Association.

Hallee also authors the Great Big Feelings children’s book series, with titles like Way Past Mad, Way Past Worried, and Kirkus-starred Way Past Jealous. She serves various organizations and schools in Philadelphia, where she resides with her husband, daughters, and dogs.

LISA HEPNER – EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Lisa is a Canadian-American writer and documentary filmmaker. For the past 30 years, she has produced non-fiction film and TV in Toronto, New York and LA. Working alongside directors Michael Apter, Jonathan Demme and Lisa F. Jackson, she has produced documentaries for the CBC, PBS, HBO, A&E, MTV and Sony Pictures Classics.

Career highlights include producing and co-directing the doc feature, “Women on the Frontlines,” that premiered at the UN and aired on PBS in 2004; premiering Jonathan Demme’s “Jimmy Carter: Man from Plains” at TIFF in 2007; and directing “The Human Trial” with her husband Guy Mossman. The film – featured in the New York Times, NPR and Forbes – has sparked a vital conversation on how to support faster cures. It was nominated for a Humanitas Prize in 2022.

Lisa teaches scripted and documentary production at USC's School of Cinematic Arts, and is a member of the PGA, the WGA, and Roco Voices, a speaker's platform for documentary filmmakers.

MFAZ MOHAMED ALI – SUBJECT

Mfaz, 17, was named for Mohamed Ali—not the boxer, but the prophet, and she is a prophet of sorts. Just ask her 3.3 million TikTok followers.

She was born in Sudan and came to Minnesota when she was two-years-old, where her parents left behind their careers of being a lawyer and teacher. She and her younger sister, Ma’ab, are best friends. Education is very important in her home.

She attends Apple Valley High School in Minnesota, which has one of the top-ranked speech programs in a state rife with competition. It’s safe to say that the school is pinning a lot of hope on Mfaz. Her sophomore year, she took first place in Humor. As a junior, she decided to challenge herself with Original Oratory. Not only did she make it to the Nationals, she made it all the way to the finals. She took a risk, and it paid off: She came

in third, guaranteeing herself a spot in next year's national next year. The topic? The representation of Muslims in today's media.

NOAH CHAO-DETIVEAUX – SUBJECT

Noah, 17, is from San Antonio, Texas. His mother was Taiwanese and his father is white from the southern bayou. Noah embraces his inner Texan, but stands out among his peers. He's got shoulder length black hair, a slightly Goth vibe, is goofy and quite awkward. People don't often know what to make of him.

Noah is super smart, which he knows (and is more than happy to inform you.) His mother, a veterinarian, told him from a young age that he was exceptionally brilliant and could accomplish anything he set his mind to. What she failed to mention, however, is that he also has Asperger's Syndrome.

In the summer of 2020, Noah's beloved mother committed suicide. Noah spent the first six months of the pandemic home alone channeling his grief into comic books. Since school was remote, none of his teachers understood why he never showed up to class. He misses his mother desperately. It was also after her death that both Noah and his father, Paul, learned of Noah's Asperger's diagnosis for the first time.

Noah and his dad were never close and his mom was in charge of school and medical appointments. They desperately love one another, but don't really know how to communicate. The death of Noah's mother – and his newfound diagnosis – have just compounded that fact. In many ways, they're beginning their relationship from scratch.

In an attempt to process and perhaps even understand his mother's death, Noah has a very controversial Original Oratory speech that demands dignity in death. His hope is to break down some of the stigma surrounding suicide in our society, and suggests if you don't want people to consider suicide, then the alternative must be better.

ESTHER OYETUNJI – SUBJECT

Esther, 17 and American-born daughter of a pastor from Nigeria, returns to the Original Oratory stage after her unprecedented victory at last year's finals, when she was just a sophomore with her topic, on "critical patriotism."

Esther loves reading, Baby Boss, and playing and watching soccer. She has deep faith and goes to church weekly. She designs her own speech outfits, which are then crafted and sent to her by her aunts in Nigeria, as a tribute to her African heritage. Her speeches are inspired by her conversations with others. Esther, who plans to be a pediatrician, is a go-getter. She considers herself a moderate, someone who watches both CNN and Fox News.

Her speech last year was about how teachers are undervalued in this country. She is nervous about having to defend her title. Last year's win was so unexpected, so extraordinary, but the competition improves every year. She knows she's the one to beat and feels responsible to her teammates and herself.

NOOR GAROUI, – SUBJECT

Noor, 17, lives with her mother and brother in rural Texas. She attends a public school with no money for Speech or much of anything. Her agriculture teacher does gun raffles to raise money for his program.

Deborah, Noor's mother, teaches theater at the school and is also the speech coach. She uprooted Noor and her brother and moved them from the big city of Fort Worth to this small town where rents are cheaper and life is (somewhat) less of a struggle.

Noor raises show pigs. It's one of her hobbies, along with blade smithing. She has virtually no relationship with her father, and she's the only Muslim kid in her school, so she's experienced her fair share of bullying. For fun, she hangs out with her friends and her boyfriend, Mike.

Noor's very close to her younger brother, Noah, who has Lennox-Gastaut Syndrome, cannot speak, and has limited mobility and life expectancy. She's fiercely protective of him; he travels to all of her events. She recalls the stares her brother receives, and the teacher who used the word "retarded" in front of her. Her speech topic is about advocating for people like Noah and those who care for them.

SAM SCHAEFER – SUBJECT

Sam, 16, comes from Moorhead, Minnesota, a mecca for hockey, which he does not play. He's more into the arts: He loves to dance, sing and perform with his friends. He runs cross-county, goes caroling during Christmas, sings at senior centers. He wants to be a professional dancer, a language education specialist or an infectious disease specialist. He's aware of his privilege, which he thinks about often. And he wonders: How can someone who does not have a traumatic life story win Original Oratory?

Yet Sam does have a 'story': He's gay, which is a pretty big deal in his tiny, conservative town. Last year, Sam was the victim of a cyber-bullying attack that left him shattered. Doctored photos circulated of his head superimposed on someone else's naked body, doing things he never did. He was forced to come out to his family before he was fully prepared to.

Sam now tries to warn against the dangers of social media to anyone who will listen. He's also very aware of how society feeds off other people's tragedy. Sam's speech focuses on the victim industry complex, also known as "trauma porn." He hopes to inspire people to question what the consumption of other people's pain is doing to us as a culture.

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