

How One School Debate Team Begat Top Lawyers, Judges

By Tracey Read

Law360 (October 2, 2026, 4:00 PM EDT) -- Thirty-one years ago, a group of students in Scarsdale, New York, joined an extracurricular activity that would end up shaping their future legal careers as federal appeals court judges, prominent litigators, top law firm chairs and law professors.

The 1995 Scarsdale High School debate team included some of today's top lawyers and judges, including Boies Schiller Flexner LLP Chair Matthew L. Schwartz.

"I don't know if it's coincidence or cause and effect, or selection, or whatever. But it's a great group of folks," Schwartz told Law360 Pulse. "I think, for most of us, this was our primary after-school [activity]. We were not competitive athletes or anything like that. So this was our competitive outlet."

That year's debate team members included Schwartz, Second Circuit Judges Steven Menashi and Matthew A. Schwartz, University of Minnesota Law School professor Daniel Schwarcz, Fordham University School of Law professor Pamela Bookman and Williams & Connolly LLP partner John Williams.

Matthew L. Schwartz said the debate team influenced his career — which saw him become a federal prosecutor in the Southern District of New York in his late 20s — in several ways.

"Competitive debate is about convincing a neutral third party — a judge — of your position, and so you learn to construct arguments in ways that are persuasive," Schwartz said. "You learn to think about the counterarguments and the holes."

Scarsdale High School practiced the Lincoln-Douglas debate style, a one-on-one competitive event focused on ethics, morality and philosophical values.

"You would sort of argue from principles and values, but we still used evidence, we still used authority



Members of the 1995 Scarsdale Debate Team include several attorneys at top firms, federal judges and law school professors. (From Matthew L. Schwartz's high school yearbook)

to support our arguments," he said. "Learning to do that in a persuasive way, and learning to argue as you have to do in competitive debate on both sides of every issue, I do think prepared me a lot for being a trial lawyer, and it certainly helped identify my interest in argument as a competitive sport."

Matthew L. Schwartz and fellow debate team member John Williams have known one another since third grade. Williams has philosophy degrees from Princeton University and Yale University. After graduating from Harvard Law School in 2004, he clerked for U.S. Circuit Judge Danny J. Boggs on the Sixth Circuit before starting at Williams & Connolly, where he's been ever since, practicing complex civil litigation.

He credits the debate team in part for his success.

"It was a forum of very smart people who challenged me and made me think better about how to present my arguments," said Williams, who is based in Washington, D.C. "It made me think more carefully about not only debate arguments, but about what I thought about politics. What I thought about what the role of government should be — all kinds of things at a pretty formative time in everybody's life."

Williams said there's not much dissimilarity between what he did back then in terms of structuring arguments, talking things through, constructive disagreement and dialogue, and what he does today with his case teams.

Like Schwartz of Boies Schiller, he treasures time spent with his former debate team members.

"We've attended many of each other's weddings," Williams said. "We're still close. We trade text messages. We grab drinks or dinner from time to time."

Williams said he considers it a stroke of luck that they were all on the 1995 debate team at the same time.

"Some of us have become lawyers, but a lot of us went on to do other super interesting things," he said. "And it's just a remarkable group of people."

He added, "I think we'll be friends for our entire lives at this point, right? I think we're stuck with each other."

--Editing by Nicole Bleier and Drashti Mehta.

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