

JV Socratic Society Brings Philosophy Talk to Teens

UNH students facilitate discussion group for Oyster River students

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MEMBERS OF THE UNH SOCRATIC SOCIETY GATHER AT THE FREEDOM CAFE IN DURHAM DURING A FALL 2022 MEETING. (PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY BETH MYERS)

For more than 60 years, UNH students have been pondering profound philosophical topics and participating in engaging conversation as part of the Socratic Society, a weekly student-led discussion group. And now the participants are taking some of those age-old debates to a younger audience.

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The UNH Socratic Society recently helped create the JV Socratic Society, a partnership with neighboring Oyster River High School that provides a similar creative environment for deep discussion and building community. The UNH group meets at The Freedom Café in downtown Durham at 4:30 p.m. on Friday afternoons during the semester and the JV group, made up of Oyster River students, convenes its weekly get-together immediately thereafter.

UNH's Socratic Society – a program of the philosophy department – is described by Nick Smith, UNH professor of philosophy, as a weekly “big ideas” discussion group where students select the topics and lead the discussions. The society has been gathering since 1959, with attendance at meetings in recent history ranging anywhere from 10 to more than 50 students.

“It is honestly one of the coolest and most heartwarming communities at UNH,” Smith says. “The students are thoughtful, friendly and just adorable.”

"From what I have observed, our UNH students are doing an amazing job of recognizing and encouraging the agency of our high school members and are excited to engage with them."

The idea behind the JV society is for the high schoolers to discuss the same topics as the UNH students, with some of the advanced college students sticking around after their meeting to facilitate the JV group's conversations.

The topic of the first JV meeting was “human nature,” Smith said, with discussion covering whether anything makes us superior to non-human animals or machines, including artificial intelligence, as well as what our purpose is and whether human

nature is an outdated myth. Other weekly topics have included whether nature is intelligent, the meaning of fate and destiny, and

how to distinguish preferences from prejudices.

The goal has been to bring the same vibe from the UNH society to the JV society, with UNH students in attendance to kickstart conversations and encourage the open sharing of thoughts and opinions.

“JV Socratic Society is an opportunity for our students to show what they’ve learned in our classes. This includes course content, but also – and arguably more importantly – the skills and disposition that one needs to be an active participant in democracy,” says Nina Windgätter, senior lecturer in philosophy and faculty advisor to the UNH Socratic Society. “From what I have observed, our UNH students are doing an amazing job of recognizing and encouraging the agency of our high school members and are excited to engage with them.”

Ulysses Smith, Nick’s son and a sophomore at Oyster River High School, may come by a deep-thinking inclination naturally – “the entirety of my family is more interested in pondering philosophical questions than most folks,” he admits – but he has found the JV society both inclusive and rewarding.

“What I enjoy most about it is really just the opportunity it provides for me and others to discuss our views of the world in a kind, welcoming and inviting setting,” Ulysses Smith says. “I have always felt at peace there.”

Adds Orion Smith, Ulysses’ younger brother and an eighth grader in the Oyster River school system, “I enjoy that I feel comfortable speaking my thoughts around people I only just met.”

The creation of the JV society has proven beneficial for both demographics involved – it gives the UNH students experience working with a younger population and the opportunity to serve as mentors and provides the high-school students a unique chance to build rapport with a group they don’t interact with at that level

often.

“One of the greatest benefits of taking part in the JV society is being able to develop your social skills with those older than you who you may feel intimidated by,” says Ulysses Smith. “I feel those skills will serve an important role later in life when you have to talk with someone you may not convene with on a regular basis.”

That confidence to be a willing participant in engaging conversations of all kinds is exactly what the leaders of the UNH Socratic Society hoped to foster in JV participants, and the fact that UNH students are taking the lead on that makes it even more impactful.

“I think that it’s really hard to be a high school student at any time, but especially now. I hope this program gives local high school students something to look forward to, and hope that it challenges them to grow as conversationalists and as thinkers,” says Windgätter. “I know how amazing and capable UNH students are, so I love to see them sharing their passion and talents with young people in our community.”

WRITTEN [Keith Testa](#) | Communications and Public Affairs

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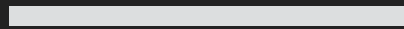
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