



9401 Starcrest Drive
San Antonio, Texas 78217
Ph: (210) 483-9100
Fx: (210) 483-9299
www.smhall.org

February 3, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my distinct pleasure to write this letter of recommendation for Joe Muller to be considered for the National Speech and Debate Association High School Coach of the Year. I have had the pleasure and honor of knowing Joe for the past 15 years, first as a competitor on the Houston speech and debate circuit, then as a teammate for the University of Texas at Austin, and finally for the past eight years as co-coaches of the Saint Mary's Hall Speech and Debate Team. I can honestly say that I have never known someone with a such a strong sense of service, passion, or energy for this activity. Over his tenure as the US Speech Teacher at Saint Mary's Hall, he has been integral in shaping our identity, our accomplishments, and our legacy as a program that celebrates and fosters creativity, student engagement, and competitive excellence. As detailed below, I believe you will be hard pressed to find another candidate whose contributions to their community have been as integral as this coach's.

When Joe and I were teammates in college, we dreamed about what it would be like to run our own program. I consider myself so very incredibly privileged to have gotten the chance to live out one of my dreams – so few get that chance. And it has been a dream. In the student body at Saint Mary's Hall, we found some of the most empathetic, intelligent, driven, funny, and sincere students one could ever hope for. Their dedication and enthusiasm made the sacrifices of time and energy an easy choice to make. I consider every weekend spent at tournaments supporting these incredible young men and women time well-spent and I have no regrets and I know that Joe feels the same. Over the years, I have watched Joe's incredible sense of empathy and energy motivate students in a way that coaches dream of. Our schedule became what it is because he made team after team fall in love with the activity just like we had.

Joe is a passionate and dedicated speaker, student, and scholar and he inspires the same in the students he works with. Over the course of his nearly ten years at Saint Mary's Hall, he has coached hundreds of students with an emphasis on the creative process, an understanding of the human condition, and an unwavering commitment to personal growth. No student enters his classroom a.k.a. the black box and leaves without the toolset to understand themselves and others or a profound sense of the humanity that is the root of performance. Joe doesn't just create forensic competitors; he crafts young people into empathetic humans with a sense of advocacy.

While at Saint Mary's Hall, Joe developed a curriculum that emphasized independent student learning balanced by the collaborative process, encouraging students to take risks, make choices, and push boundaries. He has always believed in allowing students the space and autonomy to make and own choices about their performances and has always emphasized that rhetoric of "ownership." At the end of the day, he has always believed that students are the ones in the round or on the stage and they need to be empowered and educated to understand the power of their words and choices. He believes in teaching students what they need to know to make those choices and then be prepared to defend them, understand the reasoning for why they were made, the rhetorical and performative implications of those choices, and the reverence for which every performer needs to tackle representation. During his time at Saint Mary's Hall (and at camps over the summers), Joe also revolutionized the curriculum by introducing theater theory into the classroom and encouraging students to abandon the often-harmful practices that some coaches in our community often foist on underdeveloped performers, instead preferring education and understanding. In these ways, and in so many more, Joe has made a positive impact on our community.

Alumni Seis Steves (*15) shares "Mr. Muller genuinely knows how to connect with his students, taking an interest in every single person that walks into his classroom. Whether it's a student who has been on the team for years or a novice trying out a new activity, Mr. Muller would always treat everyone with the same encouraging and cheerful demeanor. Even if someone was having a rough time, his door would always be open. Many times I remember sitting in his office, simply venting about school or any other things concerning me. I cannot imagine what school would have been like if I did not have Mr. Muller there, cheering me on from the sidelines and patting me on the back if things didn't work out. Mr. Muller treated me as more than a student; he treated me like family."

More than anything, Joe has committed himself to elevating voices in this activity – turning students into advocates. In the same way that Joe encourages students to make sure choices and equips them to defend those choices, we have also had to go to bat to defend the choices of our students and there is no better example of a coach who will do anything for his students than Joe Muller. On several occasions, we've been in the unfortunate position of having to fight for our students and Joe has been tenacious, persistent, and boisterous in those efforts. One particular example comes to mind – that of alumni Marshall Webb. When he wrote and performed an oratory that challenged the traditions of our 150+ year old school, there was resistance and backlash – especially after Marshall self-disclosed his sexuality in an assembly in front of the entire student body. Joe was a tireless advocate in defending Marshall's right to his story and to write an oration that he believed in. This is the kind of man Joe is – one that puts students first and values their voices. All of our students feel empowered and encouraged to find their own voice because of Joe and because of this activity and we are eternally grateful to both. I believe you will be hard-pressed to find another coach who does as much for his students, has accomplished as much as his peers, or has as pure a heart for this activity than Joe Muller and it is my honor to put his name forward for consideration as the Central Texas NSDA Coach of the Year.

Respectfully Yours,

Colin Malinak
*Saint Mary's Hall
Upper School Debate
TSCA, Immediate Past President
TJSDA, Founder
NSDA, Committee Chair*