



Heather
Glenboski/DN
**SOPHOMORE
SENATE CANDI-
DATE Brady Fritz
laughs while
Heath Mello and
Mike Butterfield
discuss their
answer to a
question at the
second of four
debates.**

Debates don't offer big chance for change

By Samuel McKewon

Senior editor

One expects white-hot intensity in a debate setting. There is, after all, a clashing of ideas taking place. The 2000 ASUN student election debates contained very little of visceral energy, as witnessed in the four that took place over a few weeks' time.

Debate No. 1: Rusty beginnings

Already the 2000 ASUN presidential debates are off to a shaky start. With the election a few weeks away, debate No. 1 hardly represents a crown jewel.

For one, it starts at a strange hour — 9:30 p.m. For another, the debate is in the East Campus Union, and the room it's held in is ... too small?

There's only about 100 students at the debate, but the room isn't big enough to hold them. At best, there's 60 to 70 chairs. Frankly, any more than that, one observer notes, might be overkill.

"They're probably just hedging their bets," says Chuck Rensick, adviser for the Residence Hall Association, which is co-sponsoring the debate.

The room divides itself up like this: The presidential and second vice presidential candidates from all four parties sit at the front of the room. There's, from left, A-Team presidential candidate Joel Schafer and second vice presidential candidate Joel Webber, Impact's John Conley and Amy Ellis, Duff's Jason Kidd and Betsey Saunders and Empower's Heath Mello and Mike Butterfield.

The audience:

Up front and right are Empower supporters, blue shirts blazing. Front left are the Impact supporters. Sort of in the middle are a small contingent of A-Team supporters along with a few Duff supporters.

There are a few interested observers unaffiliated with any party, but not many.

"I think most of the people here tonight have already decided who they're going to vote for," says A-Team presidential candidate Joel Schafer.

Crowd members proved true on that notion, spacing off most of the times their candidate wasn't speaking. Impact advisory board candidate Ray Rinkol does his History 202 homework. Two other female Impact supporters pick at their fingernails in unison. One girl clad in an Empower shirt stares at the ceiling for 10 minutes, uninterrupted.

There are polite claps for all parties, but Empower receives the most enthusiastic — if one can call it that — applause of the evening.

During the debate, which lasts 50 minutes, most of the candidates feel out the process. Schafer reads a scathing speech about the establishment parties. Meanwhile, Webber plays silent partner, saying nothing.

Duff's Kidd muses about students' rights, both with drinking and visitation hours, while Empower's Mello nods his head knowingly while Kidd makes his argument.

Kidd even unveils his model for a wet campus: Wake Forest University, a rich, private school in North Carolina, subject to none of the governmental stipulations of a state university.

Soon enough, the debate ends.

Impact's Conley stands at the front of the room next to his second vice presidential candidate, Ellis, when he gets a tap on the shoulder. It's Christina Riesselman, Schafer's girlfriend and A-Team treasurer.

"Good job," Riesselman says, shaking Conley's hand.

Conley looks her in the eye.

"You, too," he says.

Debate No. 2: Time for volleys

There is something to be said for an honors hall that names its television room after the color it is painted. Or maybe the room was named first, then it was painted.

Either way, Neihardt's Blue TV Lounge is the site for debate No. 2, and the presidential and second vice presidential candidates are joined by one senator each from their parties. A-Team has no senators, so first vice presidential candidate Riley Peterson joins the group. The four parties, again, face the crowd.

The debate is moderated by Honors Program Director Patrice Berger, who continually mixes up the order of questions and party names. But once things get settled down, a few parties go after each other.

Both Impact and A-Team indict Duff's idea of a wet campus, and Duff fires back by indicting A-Team's idea of a freshman orientation program. Empower's Mello stays above this fray and takes the opportunity to introduce "their baby," an action plan on orange construction paper that outlines how the party will achieve its goals.

Empower, which prepared thoroughly for debates beforehand, reflects the preparations. Mello articulates well, using his hand to talk. Schafer of A-Team does the same, and his voice rises during nearly every answer. At the debate goes on, Schafer's applause grows louder.

Impact and Conley have their support, and Conley makes a strong argument in favor of big-name entertainment, but, in general, his low-key delivery leaves a muted impression. Kidd, who suffered from bouts of long silence during his answers in the first debate, seems to have his feet more firmly under him now.

The debate runs slightly longer. There is polite applause at the end. About half of

the audience already wears a shirt supporting a party (Duff and A-Team have their own shirts to distribute now), and it's hard to say the extent to which the debates influence anyone.

"It's hard to say because you're only looking at a small part of the population," Conley says before one debate. "You're only reaching the people who care."

Debate No. 3: Crosstown traffic

One day before the elections will commence, the third debate takes place around noon in the midst of Campus Square in the Nebraska Union, with the presidential candidates and their first and second vice presidential candidates in the spotlight.

Probably a thousand students pass by the debates, along with the usual crowd of supporters sitting down in chairs. Very few of the walkers stop by to listen.

As a result, much of the debate loses its rhythm. In a loud, noisy union, hearing the candidates from more than 100 feet away is a chore. The moderators are hard to hear as well. Generally, this is a less than an ideal setting for a debate.

Candidates said they had hoped more people would pay attention through the use of a large forum. But most students, only a few tables away, stare at homework. At the computer terminals 10 feet away, users jab away at e-mail responses and Internet searches. Other students turn their heads for a few seconds before heading into Burger King for lunch.

It is in their faces. And most of them walk away.

Debate No. 4: The Millionaire

The idea for a run-off debate is hatched a few days before the run-off even occurs, as A-Team's presidential candidate suggests to me that the Daily Nebraskan sponsor a debate.

Well, yes, why shouldn't we? But it drops from my mind soon after. Until election night, when news editor Dane Stickney and I toss about fictional ASUN parties for year 2001. I mention a debate. He seconds it. And everybody's for it. So Empower and A-Team will have one more debate.

A few days later, Mello has problems with a Daily Nebraskan-sponsored forum. He thinks the Daily Nebraskan is biased against him, because of a less than glowing review in the editorial a few days earlier. So the Residence Hall Association co-sponsors the debate, and the questions are drafted at the Daily Nebraskan editorial board meeting. Mello agrees to a co-sponsorship, as does Schafer.

The day of the debate, one day before the run-off election, Mello comes down to tell Managing Editor Lindsay Young the debate is off. Schafer has agreed to call it off, Mello says, because Mello thinks nothing new can be said at the debate and that the questions will be slanted against him, considering, in his mind, the Daily Nebraskan hates him.

Daily Nebraskan staffers are angry but forced with a difficult choice: Do they try to get Mello and Schafer back on board with the debate?

Or do they help Stickney in his final-round competition for entrance onto ABC's "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" game show?

Young takes one for the team and convinces Mello back into the debate. The rest stay back with Stickney who, alas, does not get the phone call inviting him to New York.

At the debate, which is held at night in the Campus Square to cut down on noise traffic, a decent-sized crowd murmurs over the Daily Nebraskan's three-part questions. Mello and Schafer are joined by their first vice presidential candidates Cecily Rometo and Riley Peterson. The second vice presidential candidates, Impact's Ellis and Empower's Butterfield, are on hand.

Mello saw the debate as a chance to show that Rometo was better-prepared as the choice for first vice president than Peterson. And Rometo, who has two questions posed to her, does speak well.

But she speaks very, very fast. The words string together in complex sentences, and if they were written, her answers would be clause after clause, connected by commas.

Two of her friends at the front stare at Rometo as she talks, open-mouthed. When she's done, they clap, partly out of awe. Mello claps hard and shakes his head, smiling. Rometo's answers are a fine demonstration of ... something. It's hard to say if anyone quite followed her entire message.

As the debate ends, both Mello and Schafer thank everyone for showing up and, they hope, for voting tomorrow. Mello thanks a few members of the Daily Nebraskan for convincing him to re-enter the debate.

Was much accomplished with any of the debates? A few different faces arrived at the various locations but, largely, it was the same people supporting the same parties wearing the same T-shirts. Before any of the debates, Mello predicted that outcome. Schafer said at the very least, some people might change their minds.

Considering the results, that may have happened.

But considering the turnout, few new minds were brought in the voting process through the forum debate systems.