



Alumni Corner

Kevin Keatley: What Forensics did for Me Kansas State University Alumni (2003-2007)

Kevin Keatley, JD



Kevin Keatley, JD, is a Senior Assistant District Attorney at the Shawnee County District Attorney's Office. From 2003-2007 he competed for Kansas State University. His favorite event was extemporaneous speaking and his favorite comment on a ballot was on an extemp ballot: "Jessy gave the speech you wanted to give." This was a good reminder that you can always do better. His greatest accomplishment was getting to write "DE" on the chalk board in quarterfinals of AFA national tournament since he was double entered in Extemporaneous and Persuasion.

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Page | 2

ALUMNI CORNER: The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program's very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni's stories.

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“It says here on your resume that you did forensics. Is that like the CSI show on TV?” I have answered that question more than once when applying for internships and jobs since leaving collegiate forensics in 2007. However, that entry on my resume is one of the most important accomplishments I have. It told law schools that my research and writing abilities were excellent. It also tells employers that public speaking, one of people’s biggest fears, is something that is not a problem for me.

I do not think I truly appreciated the skills, knowledge, and friendships forensics gave me until I was no longer a part of the activity. It felt funny reading a New York Times without filing the articles in the extemp tubs. The weekends seemed long and boring without rushing between rounds and making sure my visual aids were in the correct room. Mostly, it felt strange not seeing people from all across the country who had become my friends. Sure, forensics is competitive and you want to do better than the competition, but you still wanted to see others do well too. It took about a year to get used to this change, but the lasting benefits of forensics were just about to start for me.

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It did not take long for my forensics skills to come in handy. I was sitting in one of my first practices on the Mock Trial team at Washburn Law School, when I taught the team the triangle pattern of movement during opening statements and closing arguments. I remember telling them, “Move with a purpose. You do not want the jury to be distracted by your movement, but you want them to realize that you are taking them in a new direction by this visual change.” I competed on the Mock Trial team for two years and our final year we made it



to the semi-final round of a national tournament. Our ballots consistently said our presentation was strong.

After graduating from law school, I wanted a job where I could be in the courtroom and continue using my public speaking skills. I was fortunate enough to get a full-time job with the Shawnee County District Attorney's Office. This jurisdiction has a yearly caseload of 2,500 criminal cases. It was fast paced and it was not uncommon to get a case file in the morning and be expected to go to trial on the case later that day. This meant I had to take good notes, quickly organize my trial strategy, and be able to figure out which important facts were needed for the trial. In some ways, it was just like putting together an extemporaneous speech.

Page | 3

I am currently in my fifth year with the District Attorney's Office and I am now a Senior Assistant District Attorney. I am in my third supervisory position and now oversee the Warrants Unit (responsible for reviewing all of the cases referred to our office for charging). I have spent a good portion of my time here training intern classes on how to be prosecutors. That training is more than just how to practice law, it also includes how to present your case to the jury. I train people to think on their feet and how to make themselves as prepared as possible in the limited time they have for each case; skills I learned competing in forensics.

I give a lot of credit to my success in the courtroom to forensics. To this day I still use the skills learned from practice sessions in Nichols Hall with my coaches: Craig Brown and Bobby Imbody. The foundation they gave me in forensics provided me with the skills to approach every public speaking situation calmly and taught me to always look for ways to improve. Whether it is a direct examination that could have been organized a little better or a closing argument that did not have the punch I wanted; I see the problem, make changes, and improve the next time.

In an age where courtroom drama is all over weeknight television, juries consistently want to see a polished (to the point it is nearly scripted) trial every time they get in the jury box. Often, the general public does not understand that the prosecutor's witnesses may not be cooperative, that DNA evidence is not collected on every case, or that there was not a video tape of a crime. Rarely do the slam dunk cases go to trial like you see on television. Courthouses were built to decide the close cases; the cases where the evidence is not the strongest. As a result, the presentation of this evidence is very important. Juries can be distracted by an attorney who paces, overuses filler words, has poorly organized thoughts, or gestures awkwardly. I have an advantage because these distracting mannerisms are not part of my presentation because of what I learned in forensics.

I often start my voir dire of prospective jurors asking them if they can sit in judgment on a case where there is not a confession by the defendant, the defendant's fingerprints or DNA were not collected, or that the victim no longer wants the case to be prosecuted. In a perfect world none of these things should be a problem for a juror, but every trial I have at least one person who would not find the defendant guilty unless there was forensic evidence, a confession, or a cooperative victim. This means the presentation of the evidence has to be appealing and cannot distract from the case. That is where forensics has put me ahead of many of my counterparts.



Aside from the public speaking portion of forensics, the research skills I learned have greatly benefited me as well. I am often asked to research legal issues because I am able to do so quickly and efficiently. I have also tracked office performance and cost savings by utilizing the skills learned in forensics. Forensics gave me the skills to look at all the variables to ensure that the analysis was thorough and complete. The ability to write a concise memo for senior staff is similar to writing an informative speech trying to explain a complex topic in an understandable way. It is truly an activity that taught me way more than I thought I would ever get out of it.

So, what did forensics do for me? It started out as a neat activity with a bunch of cool people that I got to travel with to fun places on the weekends. It slowly turned into a weekly competition that I worked hard at and had decent success in while continuing to travel to fun places with friends on the weekends. Finally, it became one of my most marketable job skills that has served me well over the past eight years. Now when I'm asked, "You did Forensics, is that like CSI?" I quickly respond with, "No, it is even better than that."

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Forensics also introduced me to my future wife. Sarah was a debater and our team room was next to the debate team room. We were both out of college before we started dating, but I would not have known her had it not been for forensics. Now the real argument between us is which activity is better: debate or forensics?

From going to Kansas State University and first learning they had a forensics program in the summer of 2003 to being a national semi-finalist at AFA, this activity has given me way more than I could ever hope to give back. While the memories of the activity may fade over time, the skills learned are as strong as ever. I still remind myself before going into a jury trial of what we often told each other before going into a final round, "Speak pretty and don't suck!" And so far, that pep talk has always worked!

Kevin's Advice

"Always work to improve yourself a little bit each day by learning from your mistakes."

