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## “Fast Talk” and Oral Advocacy

By **Ann W. Parks**

What is “Fast Talk,” and what does it have to do with the Supreme Court Institute? That was the question that Institute Director Irv Gornstein posed to a group of experts at Georgetown Law — and the (speedy) answer is, more than you might think.

On September 8, the Institute co-sponsored a screening of “Fast Talk,” a documentary by Northwestern University Professor Debra Tolchinsky that tracks the Northwestern debate team as it prepares for the national championship — delivering arguments so fast that most people cannot understand what is being said.

There’s no need to worry that oral advocacy in the Supreme Court will follow the same trend. Professor Neal Katyal and Lisa Blatt of co-sponsor Arnold & Porter both noted that as appellate advocates, they’ve had to unlearn some of the skills acquired in high school and college debate — including the speed.

“In court you have those same time constraints, but nobody would think of doing anything like that,” said Katyal, former deputy solicitor general.

Lawyer Thomas Goldstein (who debated Katyal in high school) admitted that the skills learned in debate get “built into your DNA.” Still, “no rational person thinks that they can communicate in that way outside that context,” he said.

The panel, which included appellate advocate David Frederick and filmmaker Tolchinsky, noted plenty of positives from the debate world that extend to the courtroom, such as developing research skills and learning how to lose.

But one technique that does not translate is being hit with a water gun — debaters in the film do this to prepare for unexpected distractions. As Judge Brett Kavanaugh of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit joked: “I was imagining Justice Scalia with a squirt gun, and thinking how that would work.”



*Georgetown Law Professor Neal Katyal, Judge Brett Kavanaugh of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit and Arnold & Porter’s Lisa Blatt at the September 8 “Fast Talk” film screening and discussion.*

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