

## Southern University Prof Is Son of 'Debaters' Coach

Contributed by Jamal Taylor - Black College Wire  
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Denzel Washington portrayed Arthur Tolson's father in film

The main character in the movie "The Great Debaters," is the father of Arthur Tolson, a Southern University history professor.

The film, based on a true story chronicling the life of Melvin Tolson as a debate coach, was released last month on Christmas Day.

The setting is in the 1930s and most of the movie revolves around a historically black college, Wiley College. In the film, the characters faced many odds in their attempts to become a nationally competitive debate team. The movie also gives a look at the personal struggles of each of the characters in the plot.

"Indeed the Wiley College debaters were the predecessors of the civil rights movement as they paved the way for other African Americans to overcome the segregation and racial prejudices of the 1920s and 1930s," Arthur said.

He had the opportunity to see the opening of the film on Dec. 11 in Los Angeles. Arthur Tolson, whose father died in 1966, praised Denzel Washington's work as star and director of the film.

"Washington has done a marvelous presentation of an era in African American history that was a trying experience for many blacks who lived through this period," he said.

Arthur, himself, is also a history-maker as the first black to attain a master's degree in history from Oklahoma State University and a doctorate in history from the University of Oklahoma.

Melvin Tolson was Wiley's debate coach between the 1920s-1930s. During his tenure at the university, he achieved national acclaim by defeating many top-tier HBCU schools such as: Bishop, Howard, Lincoln, Fisk, Wilberforce and Virginia Union.

In addition, the defeat of both University of Michigan and the University of Kansas placed the school in the running to face the reigning national champions, University of Southern California.

"The Great Debaters" took on the pressures of racism and segregation at a time when most blacks were treated differently than their white counterparts. "The Great Debaters" lost only one debate in over 75 matches.

Arthur has been teaching in his current capacity at Southern since 1968 and has published a book titled "The Black Oklahomans: A History" (1974).

"The movie showed a group of black youth that were great competitors," said Raymond Lockett, chair of Southern's history department and former student of Arthur. "Dr. Tolson, being my former professor during ancient times, always brought with him a wealth of African American history."

Many students who have viewed the movie think it is something that should be watched.

De'andre Hopewell, a junior finance major said, "The film was powerful and groundbreaking, and I would definitely recommend that everyone goes to see it."

The film concludes with brief synopsis of what the future held for each of the individual characters. Arthur said that the film did well in documenting his father's work at Wiley.

According to his son, "Melvin Tolson loved the challenge of masterminding debaters, loved toppling vicious stereotypes, loved the laurels he was winning for Wiley College and himself, and above all, loved to win -- for he was always a winner."

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