

A World of Poetry

BY KEIKO OHNUMA

As any grandparent will tell you, memorizing poetry was an inescapable part of school until the mid-1900s, which is why characters in old movies will sometimes bust out strangely appropriate verses at just the right moment.

Poetry is meant to be read aloud, after all — but until the resurgence of interest in spoken-word art forms over the last decade, memorizing and reciting poetry had all but vanished from the core curriculum.

To help bring it back, the national Poetry Out Loud program was formed in 2005 by the Chicago-based Poetry Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts to fan a flame of enthusiasm for this subtle performance art.

Administered by state art agencies and funded by the NEA, the program offers high stakes for students who take part in the national competition: a top award of \$20,000, and half that for second place — “one of the highest prizes in the fine arts,” according to Phyllis Kennedy of New Mexico Arts, which runs the program for our state. “Most of the big prizes are in science.”

No New Mexican has yet taken home that top award, but the state has had a finalist, Kennedy said, and they win prizes too. Each year some half-dozen to a dozen New Mexico schools participate in the competition, which requires winning at successively higher levels. For teachers, the program offers a free curriculum and materials that meet Common Core standards for English.

Ten schools are competing this year, including 23 teachers and 1,227 students at high schools including Carlsbad, Maxwell, Las Cruces and Taos, as well as Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

Juliette A. Beck, head of the theater department at the Public Academy for Performing Arts in Albuquerque, has her students take part each year.

“I think it can really give young performers a chance to own the stage, interpret text and build on public speaking,” she said.

Her students agree, saying recitation helps exercise their creativity, expand their range, and connect to poetry “in a new and exciting way,” as Kaleah Baca put it.

“The experience and feeling of being on stage is exhilarating!” added Dominique Marquez.

Quite different from slam poetry or theater because it applies criteria of “dramatic appropriateness” — meaning no histrionics, no props and minimal gestures — poetry recitation builds skills in stage presence and public speaking, not to mention an appreciation for poetry.



Adam Stewart



From left to right: Michelle Zhou, Verona Gomez, and Oceana Vasquez

All Photos: Courtesy Tim Keller



Samantha Baca

Rain

By Kazim Ali

With thick strokes of ink the sky fills with rain.
Pretending to run for cover but secretly praying for more rain.

Over the echo of the water, I hear a voice saying my name.
No one in the city moves under the quick sightless rain.

The pages of my notebook soak, then curl. I've written:
“Yogis opened their mouths for hours to drink the rain.”

The sky is a bowl of dark water, rinsing your face.
The window trembles; liquid glass could shatter into rain.

I am a dark bowl, waiting to be filled.
If I open my mouth now, I could drown in the rain.

I hurry home as though someone is there waiting for me.
The night collapses into your skin. I am the rain.

Students choose three poems to learn from the Poetry Out Loud anthology, which is compiled and updated annually. One poem must be under 25 lines, one written before the 20th century and the final, student's choice.

Videotaped examples of great recitation by kids can be seen at poetryoutloud.org, but it's more exciting to watch the state finals, said Kennedy. This year's state finals will start at 1 p.m. on Sunday, March 12, at the St. Francis Auditorium in the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe. Admission is free.

The experience “really makes you weep,” Kennedy said. “They're so accomplished.”

Keiko Ohnuma is a freelance journalist.



Verona Gomez



Michelle Zhou



Luc Perrault