



SONOMA'S MOST WIDELY READ NEWSPAPER

February 17, 2009 |

[e-mail this story](#)

Creekside competes in Poetry Out Loud

Jody Purdom | Special to the Sun

Poetry is alive and well in the Sonoma Valley Unified School District, thanks to a group of dedicated teachers and administrators. Walt Williams, a teacher at Creekside High School, recently brought the poetry into his classroom with help from Karin Demarest, an arts education consultant with the Arts Council of Sonoma County, and Pam Yezbick, an Occidental-based artist and poet.

The program Williams used is called the Poetry Out Loud National Recitation Contest, which encourages the nation's youth to learn about great poetry through memorization and performance, "Poetry Out Loud is a great opportunity for Sonoma County students to deepen their appreciation of poetry as an oral art form," said Demarest. "They learn to bring poems to life. The competitive element raises the stakes, and pits them against their peers from both public and private high schools."

The program is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, publisher of "Poetry" magazine, which have partnered with other U.S. art agencies to fund the program. At the county level, the contest is run by the Arts Council of Sonoma County and the California Arts Council.

Sonoma County high school students are among hundreds across the state working hard to interpret, memorize and recite classical poetry. At stake are hundreds of dollars in prize money at both the state and national competition levels. A total of \$50,000 in scholarships and school stipends will be awarded to the winners at the national finals, to be held in Washington, D.C. at the end of April.

Williams was instantly intrigued by the contest. A teacher at Creekside for the past ten years, this is Williams' first year teaching English. When long-time colleague Demarest approached him with the Poetry Out Loud idea, he realized it could be a great way for his students to express themselves.

"I had a lot of trepidation at first and wondered if the students would buy into the program and even be able to memorize and recite the poems," said Williams. "Literally,

one week in, my fears subsided as the students became excited to learn a new medium. Then, when the overall winner turned out to be a student who suffers from anxiety, often to the point of not being able to stay in class, the magic of the program became apparent.” That student is Randy Gonzalez, a Creekside junior. Gonzalez, just shy of his seventeenth birthday, is a big, shy kid. His quiet reserve came across as cold but once he opened up he talked a friendly blue streak. He’s smart and well-spoken but has an anxiety disorder so strong it sometimes gets in the way of learning. Prior to coming to Creekside, Gonzalez attended the Gateway school, the district’s alternative school for students 16 and younger. He went straight to Gateway after being expelled from Altimira, halfway through the eighth grade. He says he stays out of trouble now, preferring to finish his education in the hopes of getting a good job.

The Poetry Out Loud competition appealed to Gonzalez for a number of reasons. “At first, I did it for the credit,” said Gonzalez honestly. “But once I got started and heard the other students’ poems, I realized how much I like poetry and how it can give kids an opportunity to vent frustration and anger.”

For the recitation, Gonzalez chose the poem “Let it Be Forgotten” by Sara Teasdale. The poem speaks of the passage of time in a soft, gentle way. But Gonzalez’s interpretation is different. “I chose the poem because I liked the title. It reminds me to forget my struggles. I think the world would be a better place if we all tried to forget our past troubles and just get along,” said Gonzalez.

In all, 19 Creekside students recited poems during the school’s contest. The recitations were judged based on audience response by a panel of teachers as well as their peers. Gonzalez was chosen as winner based on his participation for the entire three-week session. He will next recite his poem at the county competition to be held on Feb. 21 at 7 p.m. at the Glaser Center in downtown Santa Rosa.

This is the third year Sonoma County students have participated in Poetry Out Loud, with the number of participating high school students doubling this year.