



For Immediate Release

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High School Student Shawntay Henry Wins \$20,000 First Prize in National Poetry Competition

Poetry Foundation and NEA Announce 2008 Champion of Poetry Out Loud: National Recitation Contest

CHICAGO — With a fan club including her family, friends, English teacher, poetry coach, and members of the Virgin Islands Council on the Arts, 16-year-old Shawntay Henry of the United States Virgin Islands captured the audience with her poetry recitations and was named the 2008 *Poetry Out Loud* National Champion. Along with her title, Henry, a 10th grade student at Charlotte Amalie High School, receives a \$20,000 scholarship prize. The *Poetry Out Loud* National Finals were held last night at the George Washington University Lisner Auditorium in Washington, DC. Henry was among 12 finalists and 52 state champions from around the country who participated in the third annual national poetry recitation contest, sponsored by the Poetry Foundation and National Arts Endowment.

“Poetry was never something I thought I’d get involved with, but I realized I had a hidden talent,” said Henry, who capped her winning performance with a thoughtful recitation of the poem “Frederick Douglass” by Robert E. Hayden. This was the first year that the U.S. Virgin Islands participated in the *Poetry Out Loud* program. Henry advanced to National Champion from a field of competition that included more than 1,500 high schools and 200,000 high school students around the country.

The second-place winner was Sophia Elena Soberon of Brookings-Harbor High School in Brookings, Oregon, who received a \$10,000 scholarship prize. The Utah State Champion, Madison Niermeyer, of Skyline High School in Salt Lake City, received the third-place prize and a \$5,000 scholarship.

The other 12 finalists included Elijah Orengo of Georgia; Sequoia Jelks of Indiana; Gabrielle Guarracino of Massachusetts; Charles White of Michigan; Allison Strong of New Jersey; Hannah JoBeth Roark of Oklahoma; Elsa Vande Vegte of South Dakota; BreAnna Jones of Washington State; and Carolyn Rose Garcia of West Virginia. Each of the top 12 finalists received a \$1,000 scholarship prize and each of finalists’ schools received a \$500 stipend for the purchase of poetry books.

Special guest judges presided over the competition, including Garrison Keillor, host of the radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*; Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Natasha Trethewey; novelist and journalist Leslie Schwartz; *Poetry Daily* editor Don Selby; 2007 *Poetry Out Loud* National Champion Amanda Fernandez; and memoirist, activist, and poet Luis Rodriguez. Scott Simon, host of National Public Radio’s *Weekend Edition Saturday*, served as master of ceremonies.

On April 28, 52 high school students – *Poetry Out Loud* champions from every state, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands – competed in three semifinal rounds based on geographic region. Twelve students advanced to compete in the National Finals on April 29. Judges evaluated student performances on criteria including physical presence, articulation, evidence of understanding, level of difficulty, and accuracy. Students performed poems from the *Poetry Out Loud* print and online anthologies (www.poetryoutloud.org). The event was the culmination of a pyramid-structure competition that began last September among schools across the country.

The National Finals are the result of efforts by many partners. The NEA and the Poetry Foundation have contributed support for administration of the program, educational materials, and prizes for both the state and National Finals. Each State Arts Agency implemented the program in high schools in each state, often in collaboration with local arts organizations. The *Poetry Out Loud* National Finals were administered by the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation.

Poetry Out Loud seeks to foster the next generation of literary readers by building on the resurgence of poetry as an oral art form, as seen in the slam poetry movement and the popularity of rap music. Through *Poetry Out Loud*, students can master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about their literary heritage. Now in its third year of national competition, *Poetry Out Loud* has inspired thousands of high school students to discover classic and contemporary poetry. To find out how to get involved in the 2009 *Poetry Out Loud* National Recitation Contest, visit www.poetryoutloud.org.

About the Poetry Foundation

The Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine and one of the largest literary organizations in the world, exists to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience. The Poetry Foundation seeks to be a leader in shaping a receptive climate for poetry by developing new audiences, creating new avenues for delivery, and encouraging new kinds of poetry through innovative literary prizes and programs. For more information, please visit www.poetryfoundation.org.

About the National Endowment for the Arts

The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts, both new and established; bringing the arts to all Americans; and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Arts Endowment is the largest national funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

About Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation

Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation supports the richness and diversity of the region's arts resources and promotes wider access to the art and artists of the region, nation and world. To learn more about MAAF, its programs and services, visit www.midatlanticarts.org.