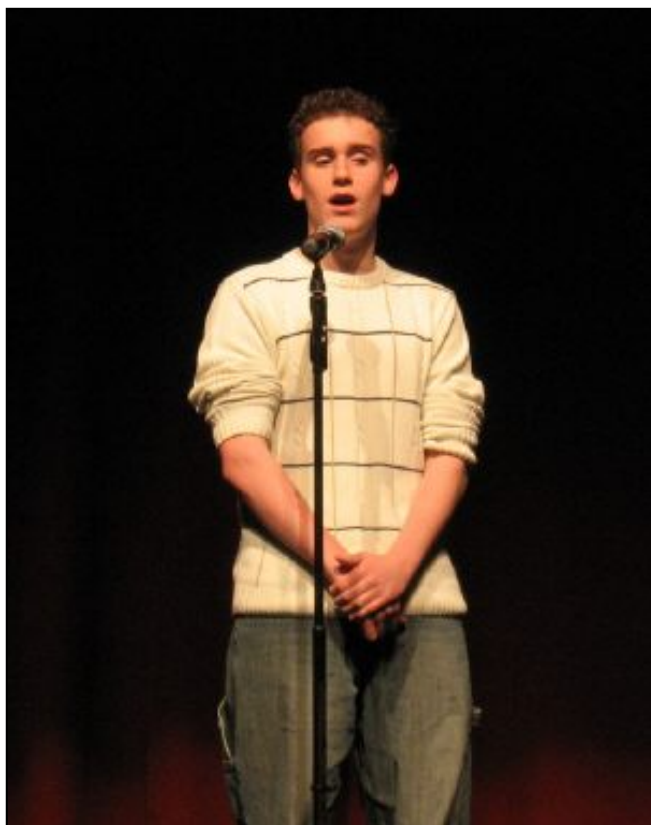


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Oxford Students Recite Poetry to Reach State Competition

By: Leda Quirke



Students at Oxford High School recently participated in a Poetry Out Loud National Recitation Contest sponsored by the National Endowment for the Art and Poetry Foundation. Pictured above during their performance were Katie Biagioni, one of five runners-up; Daniel Brandon (above), who placed second; and Emily Seibert, who tied with Shelby Burnett for first place. Other runners-up were Tyler Williams, Kathleen Mifflin, Nicole Arrato and Chris Wentz. (Quirke photos)

OXFORD - They stood alone on the stage of the darkened Oxford High School auditorium, drawing from their memories for the words to the poems they had elected to recite.

Some sailed through the process without a hitch; other struggled with periodic lapses, requiring prompts from English Department Chairman Kelley O'Neal.

But in the end, all 27 local participants in the Poetry Out Loud National Recitation Contest had their chance at being chosen to represent their school in the organization's state competition in New Britain on March 13.

The winners of that competition move on to the national finals in Washington, D.C., on April 29.

According to rules established by the sponsors, the National Endowment for the Arts and Poetry Foundation, the students chose two poems from a lengthy list.

Popular choices were "It Couldn't Be Done," by Edgar Guest, "If," by Rudyard Kipling and "The Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

They then spent a couple of weeks learning the verses and practicing them in front of family and friends and occasionally in front of a mirror.

As they recited the poems in the competition, they were judged by five of the school's staff, including teachers, department heads and Principal Frank Samuelson.

Points on which they were rated included physical presence, voice and articulation, appropriateness of dramatization, level of difficulty, evidence of understanding and overall performance.

In all categories, except overall performance, the range was 1 to 6 with 1 being the weakest and 6 being outstanding.

For overall performance the range was 2 to 12. The highest achievable total was 50 points.

"I was really nervous," said Shelby Burnett, who tied for first place with Emily

Seibert. "The lights were really bright," she said.

Shelby said she practiced a lot, at times picturing herself reciting to a another person.

She said she elected to recite "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman because she had read it in a book belonging to her mother and really liked it. She chose her second poem, "The Orange" by Wendy Copes, because "it was really fun."

Nicole Arrato, one of five runners-up in the competition, indicated that she was not overcome with stage fright when she recited her poems, "The Mask" and "Let It Be Forgotten" by Sara Teasdale.

"I didn't allow myself to think about that. I just hoped for the best," she said.

Ms. O'Neal said after the competition that the competition was an opportunity for students to appreciate poetry as a spoken art form.

She said too often the focus of educators and readers of poetry is on analysis, rather than on the spoken word.

Mr. Samuelson, who announced the winners, said the students managed to make a difficult exercise seem easy.

"All of you are winners," he said.

In addition to the first-place winners, those recognized for outstanding performance were Daniel Brandon, who placed second and also will participate in the state competition, and the following runners-up: Tyler Williams, Kathleen Mifflin, Chris Wentz and Katie Biagioni.