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High school students participate in poetry competition finals

Scott Fontaine; THE NEWS TRIBUNE

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Eric Zuehlsdorff is no stranger to the stage. The senior plays saxophone and has spoken in front of his classmates at Puyallup High School, but a spoken poetry competition presents a totally different feel.

"You're more exposed up there," he said. "With music, you're up with a band. But with this, it's only you up there."

Zuehlsdorff, dressed in a black shirt, black slacks and a gold tie, stood in front of a crowd of about 50 people Saturday at the University of Puget Sound's Schneebeck Concert Hall and delivered three poems. His third selection, "Thoughts in a Zoo" by Countee Cullen, propelled him to an honorable-mention finish.

"I loved it. I've never had a chance to experience something like this before," said Zuehlsdorff, who only began practicing after the start of this semester. He and nine others competed in the Washington finals of the Poetry Out Loud competition, which allows high school students to compete in spoken performances. The national program, a partnership with state arts agencies, the Poetry Foundation and the National Endowment of the Arts, launched during the 2005-06 school year. Twenty-six schools in Washington take part in the program.

The 10 finalists advanced to Saturday's competition after winning regional finals in Pierce, Thurston, Spokane and Yakima counties. Each stood on the stage and delivered a dramatic recitation from a range of poets that included Allen Ginsberg, Lord Byron and Walt Whitman.

Schneebeck Concert Hall maintained a hip atmosphere during the competition. Dim lights in the seating area contrasted with brighter – but still soft – illumination on stage. After each participant finished his or her recitation, a jazz duo played short riffs on a saxophone and a stand-up bass. The smooth sounds also wafted through the hall during breaks.

The contest was divided into three rounds. State poet laureate Samuel Green performed before all 10 competitors recited their poems. Laura "Piece" Kelly, a former National Poetry Slam competitor, performed to begin the second round, in which all the students performed again.

The field was then pared to five finalists. Taylor Mali, a National Poetry Slam champion, performed before the final round. Mali later performed a second, longer selection and hosted a workshop after the competition.

BreAnna Jones won the competition, receiving \$200 and a paid trip to Washington, D.C., for the national finals on April 28-29. Her school, West Valley High in Yakima, also won a \$500 stipend to purchase poetry books.

The runner-up, Kayla Marshall won \$100 and a \$200 stipend for her school, Tenino High.

Zuehlsdorff was one of three Pierce County students in the competition, and the only one to make the finals. Janice Rim, a senior at Franklin Pierce High School, hadn't given much thought to poetry performance until she took up recitation as a class assignment. She was hooked.

"When you just click with a poem," Rim said, "it just happens."

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