

Westlake sophomore to take stage in national poetry contest



Allen Sullivan/AJC
Elijah P. Orengo practices poetry Friday in his Atlanta bedroom.

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It's D-Day for Elijah P. Orengo.

For the past six weeks, the Atlanta teen has spent three hours a day hammering, drilling, digging deep into three poems, including Shakespeare's fortune-obsessed Sonnet 29.

After the first week, he knew them. After the second week, he never looked at the texts again. After the third week, he could recite them underwater, in free-fall, upside down.

Although conditions will be less challenging than that, tensions will be high Monday when he walks onto a stage at George Washington University in Washington and throws down.

As Georgia's top young poetry reciter, Elijah will go up against 49 other state champions, plus representatives of the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands, in the finals of a versifying smackdown called Poetry Out Loud.

"I am so amped!" the lanky 16-year-old, a sophomore at Westlake High School in Fulton County, said during a Thursday evening conversation at his home near East Point. "I'm really ready. I want to win."

Dad thinks he'll take it. "Last night he kept me up," said his father, Michael Orengo, a mortgage broker. "I heard him reciting in his room until 11:30. I think he started at 9."

Poetry as sport

The national contest, now in its third year, is sponsored by a Chicago nonprofit called the Poetry Foundation and by the National Endowment for the Arts. More than 200,000 high school students have participated this year, competing at the local and state levels.

For the national finals Monday and Tuesday, students must prepare three poems from a growing canon of 600 listed on the Poetry Out Loud Web site, www.poetryoutloud.org. Contestants must recite without theatricality and are judged on accuracy, understanding, elocution and presentation.

Like the national spelling bee, now an annual staple on ESPN, the poetry recitation contest is a clever way to bring the aggressive spirit of sports into the world of learning. Parents can also get caught up in the game.

At the state finals last month, after Elijah nailed his performances, his father stood up in the audience and shouted, "That's my boy!" His teacher, Yvette Zarod, burst into tears.

Zarod teaches English at Westlake and conducted the Poetry Out Loud competitions there. She has also served as Elijah's steadfast coach and supporter.

"His voice is really mature beyond his years," she said. "He pulls out the empathy in the poem in a way that not a lot of other teenagers can do."

A change of fortune

Elijah is an unusually self-possessed young man in spectacles and preppy clothes. He takes Latin in school and has organized a poetry club for friends to discuss their original work. (He's written at least a hundred.) To Elijah, learning a poem is like cracking a safe: The goodies are inside.

For Monday's battle, he has prepared "Beauty" by Tony Hoagland, the 52-line "Sentimental" by Albert Goldbarth and the Shakespeare sonnet.

When he entered Westlake's competition last year as a 15-year-old freshman, he wasn't ready, said Zarod. He froze. This year, she said, he has been transformed, by dint of talent and relentless labor.

At home he recites in his chocolate-painted bedroom, standing inside the limits of a square outlined in

duct tape on the floor. Practicing inside the tape duplicates the ideal microphone range.

Zarod and Elijah's stepmother, Dessalyn Orengo, will both be in the audience at GWU's Lisner Auditorium, sitting in separate sections of the hall. Elijah wants them spread out so he can sweep his glance over the full audience as he makes eye contact with each.

He aims to bring the trophy back home — not to mention the \$20,000 scholarship that goes with it — and get some love for a state that hasn't yet made it past the semifinals. "I want to bring Georgia out of the shadows."

During an impromptu recitation at home Thursday, Elijah stood. He settled himself in slow motion, closing his eyes, breathing like an archer drawing back the string.

"When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," he began, in the sonnet that tells of pain and jealousy redeemed by love, then fairly spit out the anger of the ninth line, "Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising," before shading the final couplet in a reverent glow: "For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings/That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

Outside, in the street, an ice cream truck rang its bell.

"There's an ice cream man in the neighborhood!" Elijah said. "Stay focused," his stepmother said. "But it's ice cream!" Elijah protested. "We have ice cream here," she countered.

Enduring the slings and arrows of this outrageous fortune, Elijah postponed the ice cream, aimed his eyes back on the prize and returned to work.

PORTRAIT OF A POET

- Name: Elijah P. Orengo
- Age: 16
- Status: Sophomore, Westlake High School
- Ancient language spoken: Latin
- Family: Mother, Tamatha Battle; father, Michael Orengo; stepmother, Dessalyn Orengo. Six siblings: Ceci, 21; Michael, 19; Evin, 15; Tyla, 11; Leah, 9; Hope, 4.
- Career goals: College, medical school, practice as ob/gyn or psychologist.
- Preferred poets: Alexander Pope, William Shakespeare, Langston Hughes, Edgar Allan Poe.
- Not wild about: Maya Angelou ("She's a woman's poet.")
- Favorite prose poet: Martin Luther King Jr. ("If you want to learn the basics of poetry — figuration, language, repetition, metaphor, simile — then go to him.")
- Favored music: Tim McGraw, Linkin Park, Maroon 5, Feist, Snow Patrol, Snoop Dogg, Nickelback, The Dream, Feist, Yael Naim.
- Quote: "He's a brain." — Michael Orengo on his son.