



National Public Radio (NPR)

All Things Considered 8:00 PM EST

April 29, 2008 Tuesday

Students Competes in Poetry Recitation Contest

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From NPR News, it's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Robert Siegel.

MELISSA BLOCK, host:

And I'm Melissa Block.

If you're looking for proof that teenagers aren't only interested in texting their friends or finding out who got booted off "American Idol," there is Poetry Out Loud. It's a recitation contest sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, and the winner will be announced tonight. About 200,000 high school students took part in this year's competition. They recited poetry of all kinds from memory.

NPR's Elizabeth Blair listens in.

ELIZABETH BLAIR: At Lisner Auditorium on the campus of George Washington University, the theater is pitch-dark, the audience is quiet, four judges sit down in front. The only thing on stage is a microphone. One by one, students take their turns.

Unidentified Woman #1: Death be not proud, though some have called...

Unidentified Man #1: Don't do it. She's the wrong woman.

Unidentified Woman #2: At pet stores in Detroit, you can buy frozen rats for 75 cents a piece.

Unidentified Man #2: America settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire.

Unidentified Woman #3: I want to say, just got to say something about those beautiful, beautiful, beautiful out of sight of black myth.

BLAIR: Students from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have

recited a lot of poetry to make it this far in high school, regional and state contests. The judging is tough. Students are scored on physical presence, voice and articulation, level of difficulty and understanding. They picked three poems from a list of about 600.

Dana Gioia is chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Mr. DANA GIOIA (Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts): And what we really want to do is to open up the whole world of poetry to these kids and show them that almost anything that's part of human experience, there is a great poem about.

(Soundbite of applause)

Ms. ALLISON STRONG (Finalist, Poetry Out Loud): "Fever 103" by Sylvia Plath.

BLAIR: Allison Strong is the finalist from New Jersey. She says she practiced with her teachers and poets-in-residence at her high school in Union City. It took her a while to get Sylvia Plath right.

Ms. STRONG: It's very easy to get a little over dramatic with that poem. In my classroom competition, I flailed my arms around and I was screaming, and it was ridiculous. And then the poets-in-residence, the judges, told me afterwards, you did great, but you need to tone it down.

Pure? What does it mean? The tongues of hell are dull, dull as the triple tongues of dull, fat Cerberus who wheezes at the gate.

BLAIR: Allison Strong also recited a Shakespeare sonnet and Allen Ginsberg's "Supermarket." She'll go on to compete in Poetry Out Loud's final round tonight. Students are encouraged to choose poems of different styles and time periods.

Ms. TIA ROBINSON (Finalist, Poetry Out Loud): "She Walks in Beauty" by Lord Byron.

BLAIR: Tia Robinson, the finalist from Virginia, showed real talent for conveying a poem's meaning, but also for making it her own. She recited poems by Nikki Giovanni and Lucille Clifton. The one who gave her the most trouble? Lord Byron.

Ms. ROBINSON: He's a man and I'm a woman. You know, he's Caucasian and I'm African-American. So it's kind of hard to put yourself in those shoes when you don't really know how he's feeling.

BLAIR: So Tia Robinson pretended she was reading the poem to her mother who died when Tia was 2.

Ms. ROBINSON: A mind at peace with all below, a heart whose love is innocent.

(Soundbite of applause)

BLAIR: Tia Robinson did not make it to tonight's final round, but she's only a sophomore and plans to compete next year. In the lead-up to the first Poetry Out Loud three years ago, there were complaints that making teenagers memorize poems would just turn them off. But the program is entirely voluntary and it has grown exponentially.

Poet Holly Bass is one of the judges.

Ms. HOLLY BASS (Poet; Judge, Poetry Out Loud): There's nothing like being able to recall some beautiful literature by heart. And the fact that it is almost a lost art in America, it just makes this kind of competition all the more important.

BLAIR: Tonight, 12 students are competing in Washington, D.C. to become Poetry Out Loud's national champion.

Elizabeth Blair, NPR News.