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# The Oregonian

## **Gresham high schoolers discover power of poetry**

**The Center for Advanced Learning gives students the skills to excel in competitions**

Thursday, May 01, 2008

**CASEY PARKS**

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At the Center for Advanced Learning in Gresham, students wear scrubs to learn medicine. They dismantle engines to learn about automobiles. That is, they learn by doing.

But English can be a mystery. How do you do English?

A few years ago, teacher Rita Ramstad unlocked the mystery. By enlisting students in **Poetry Out Loud**, a competition in which students memorize, interpret and perform poems, she could make English tangible. They'd hold it in their mouths and hearts, if not their hands.

Yes, some would hate it. They'd stubbornly resist memorization. They'd pick the shortest poems (Robert Frost's nine-line "Fire and Ice" is banned next year). But others would feel poetry the way they'd learned to feel a machine.

They'd get "shivery" at hearing a classmate's voice. They'd make judges cry with their performances.

"That's what poetry is supposed to be," Ramstad says. "Touching something inside. Different poems do that for different people. That's what this is about, the search for the poem that does that for you."

Oregon schools began participating in the national Poetry Out Loud program three years ago. Students compete at the school level, performing two pieces, until one representative is chosen. At the state competition, school winners perform three poems. Judges pick a winner based on expression and interpretation.

And CAL students have led the way. In the first two years of the competition, they won first place in state. This year, senior Caren Sims was one of six finalists at the state competition in April.

Ramstad had told the students, "Pick a poem that makes you tingle." Sims flipped through the textbook, skimming, scanning. Around her, students were laughing at some of the funnier poems. Then, Sims found it.

"Miss Ramstad," she said. "I got the tingle."

It came from Dudley Randall's "The Ballad of Birmingham," about the 1963 church bombing that killed four young girls in Birmingham, Ala.

Sims is an engineering student, a senior who writes poems but still complained when asked to read them in class.

"Especially with like 19th-century poems," she says, wrinkling her face. "I'd say, 'Aww, man. I gotta read a poem?' "

Before Sims performed "The Ballad of Birmingham," the bombings had been just another piece of history, another tale of suffering that Sims had seen in textbooks. But after she watched people cry from her performance of the piece, the reality kicked in. The tingle started to spread.

That transformation -- in Sims and other students -- surprised teachers, Ramstad says. "We saw kids connecting with poetry in ways they never had before."

For Sims, that connection means a new way of reading. Now, she reads poems first "just to get all the words out of the way." Then, she settles down for a second reading to really understand the emotions.

It's like learning how to fix a car by taking it apart. Or understanding biology by slicing open specimens. Sims and her classmates are deconstructing poems, holding their different parts in different ways, to figure out what they mean.

"You do get to feel it," Sims says. "You get to re-create it with your own meaning. It's like you become the author. That's priceless."

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