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## Poetry win sends senior to national competition

Repeat - For a second year, the Center for Advanced Learning produces a state winner in the contest

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**MELODY FINNEMORE**

**The Oregonian**

Gresham's Center for Advanced Learning is home to the state's Poetry Out Loud champion for the second consecutive year. Senior Ian Jones is headed to Washington, D.C., to vie for the national title.

Jones, 18, of Gresham will compete Monday and Tuesday at George Washington University against 50 other students from across the country. The winner will receive \$20,000, first runner-up will win \$10,000, and \$5,000 will go to the second runner-up. In addition, each of the nine finalists receives \$1,000 plus \$500 for their school's library.

Poetry Out Loud is sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Poetry Foundation and the Oregon Arts Commission. It encourages high school students to learn about poetry through memorization, performance and competition. Each contestant must recite three poems selected from a 400-poem anthology provided by the Endowment for the Arts.

Jones selected "Litany" by Billy Collins, "To a Mouse" by Robert Burns and "Ikebana" by Cathy Song. Jones said he chose the Collins poem for its playfulness and "Ikebana" for its Japanese influence. He has studied Japanese for four years, lived in Japan as an exchange student for six weeks and is considering a career in international business.

"To a Mouse" has a personal connection for Jones, who said his grandmother was a member of Burns' clan in Scotland. He also likes the contrast provided by the three poems.

"The three of them play off each other because they are so different," Jones said. "'Litany' is very American, you've got the Scottish influence in 'To a Mouse' and there's the Japanese inspiration in 'Ikebana.' And two of the poems were written by men while the third was by a woman."

"The styles are really different, and it allows Ian to show that he's not a one-note guy," said Rita Ramstad, English teacher and Poetry Out Loud coordinator for the Center for Advanced Learning.

Jones said pretty much every moment he has alone these days, whether driving or taking a shower, is spent honing his recitation skills. He and the other national contestants will be judged on criteria such as volume, voice inflection, evidence of understanding, level of difficulty, accuracy and eye contact.

While he admits to a small case of nerves at the prospect of competing in the nation's capital, Jones is no stranger to performing before large groups. He has taken part in drama productions, has sung and juggled before audiences, and he teaches group fitness classes.

Jones, who also enjoys writing, is well-versed in his appreciation for literature. His aunt was a children's librarian, and his grandfather taught English at Western Oregon University. "I come from a very literary family," he said. "Everyone on my dad's side is very into literature and linguistically minded. I'm very grateful for that."

Jones grew up reading children's favorites such as Shel Silverstein and Edgar Allan Poe, and now enjoys humor writers Tom Robbins and Douglas Adams. Jones plans to attend Rice University next year, where he hopes to join the Houston university's competitive poetry slam team.

As a student who appreciates the lighter side of literature, Jones said he once asked Ramstad why the majority of books read in high school English classes are so depressing.

"I think that may be why a lot of kids lose interest in reading," Ramstad said. "There's definitely a lot of quality literature that is uplifting and hopeful. It doesn't all have to be angst-ridden and bleak."

Ramstad said she appreciates the Poetry Out Loud program because it presents a range of poems that every student can enjoy. It also gives teachers a new way to introduce teens to the art form, she said.

"Students can learn only so much about a poem by writing an essay about it," Ramstad said. "You really do have to know your poem to do Poetry Out Loud. It allows us a different way to engage with poetry that is more enjoyable for the students, and it's fun for the teachers to watch, too."

Every student at the Center for Advanced Learning participates in the program.

The school competition was held in late February. The state competition was March 10 in Salem. As the state winner, Jones received \$200 and an all-expenses paid trip to Washington for himself and a chaperone. His school also received a \$500 stipend to buy poetry books.

Jones said he was just hoping to win the school contest after coming in second last year to senior Michael Santiago. Santiago won at the state level and went on to place in the top 12 at the national competition.

"To go to state and win and then go to the nationals is just gravy," Jones said.