

Kaleena Kovach, 16

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Palmer sophomore recites her way to national poetry contest

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WILLOW WELTER

Kaleena Kovach stepped onstage, ready to recite one of three poems she'd been practicing every day for the previous two weeks. She'd made it past the competition at Palmer High School and had moved on to the state finals, held March 16 at the Lakewood Cultural Center.

Competing against 10 other Poetry Out Loud participants from Colorado schools, Kaleena, 16, knew her performance could win a trip to nationals in Washington, D.C., and then perhaps a \$20,000 scholarship. The pressure was on.

"The vias of Italy turn to memory with each turn and clack of the train's wheels, with every stitch of track we leave behind, the duomos return again to my imagination ..."

The poem she began with was "Somewhere to Paris" by Richard Blanco. Each competitor had chosen three poems from an anthology provided by Poetry Out Loud, a program that encourages youths to explore poetry through memorization and performance.

With her performances of "Somewhere to Paris," Margaret Atwood's "They Are Hostile Nations," and Walt Whitman's "Come Up From the Fields, Father," Kaleena wowed the judges from the Colorado Council on the Arts and won the title of state champion, \$200, and a trip to Washington, D.C., to compete in the national recitation contest April 28. Her school receives \$500 for the purchase of poetry books for the school library.

Kristina Sherman from Sand Creek High School was named state runner-up. She won \$100, and \$200 for her school's library.

Kaleena is the second Palmer student in a row to win the Poetry Out Loud state competition. Last year, Brittany Harden made it to nationals. Both girls were inspired by Heather Brown, an English teacher at Palmer, to participate in Poetry Out Loud.

"She definitely helps me to really not just be reciting the poem but to really be in the poem," Kaleena said, "and have a character, and have a really detailed and vivid image to put myself into what I recite so I'm no longer me, I'm more of this character who is just a body for the words."

Brown said this was the second year Palmer has participated in Poetry Out Loud.

"It's a great opportunity for students to internalize poetry," she said.

Brown loves to see her students getting involved in poetry.

"I put it to use a lot in my classroom," she said. "That's where I have the biggest influence. I require them to recite poetry as assignments."

Poetry Out Loud competitors are judged in six categories: voice and articulation, evidence of understanding, physical presence, level of difficulty, appropriateness of dramatization and accuracy.

Kaleena is preparing for nationals by continuing to work with Brown. She also scored a coach in Jose Mercado, a DU professor who was a judge at the state competition. Kaleena said she'll be traveling to Denver a couple of times

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COURTESY OF HEATHER BROWN

Kaleena Kovach, 2009 Colorado state Poetry Out Loud champion

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before nationals for coaching sessions with Mercado.

With a \$20,000 scholarship going to the winner of nationals, there's a lot on the line.

"I don't think I've ever been so nervous for something in my entire life," Kaleena said. "But this is something I really love and I'm really good at. So I'm really nervous but at the same time, I'm really excited. It's kind of sinking in, that I'm at this level, that I'm going to D.C. and reciting for all these people.

"So there's lots of squealing and jumping up and down."

Brown quipped that while she'd like to believe that the two-year streak of Palmer students winning state finals is the result of her great teaching, it's probably because the contest is relatively small and new in town, combined with "the culture I think Palmer propagates, which is risk-taking."

"Palmer students are willing to jump in and try things out, and they tend to have a high level of excitement for self-expression, and both Brittany and Kaleena are just self-expressive, exuberant individuals."

The National finals will be held at George Washington University and feature a performance by singer/songwriter Natalie Merchant, plus NPR's Scott Simon and Garrison Keillor of "A Prairie Home Companion" as guest judges.

Poetry Out Loud is a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts, the Poetry Foundation and state arts agencies around the United States. Lighthouse Writers Workshop, a Colorado nonprofit, helped coordinate the program this year.

More from Kaleena

What do you want to pursue as a career?

"I really love English. Ms. Brown kind of inspires me toward the route of ... well, I've always wanted to become a teacher, but it definitely solidified it being in her class my freshman year."

Kaleena wants to major in creative writing and minor in theater at college, then become an English teacher.

Hobbies

She's an active member of Palmer's Mask and Sandal drama club, she works with the Manitou Art Theatre, and writes her own poetry.

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