

Teens recite poems in countywide competition

By Eliav Appelbaum
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Bri Holmes stood alone on the stage, reciting John Keats' "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be."

Suddenly, the poem's lyrics escaped the High School at Moorpark College senior.

Even when the last lines eluded her, Holmes finished her delivery at the Ventura County Poetry Out Loud competition at the High Street Arts Center in Moorpark on Wednesday night. When she sat back down to her seat, her right hand covered her face.

Holmes, 18, walked up to the stage for the second round.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I totally butchered Keats."

The audience laughed, and Holmes, breathing a sigh of relief, flawlessly recited Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter."

Although Holmes' valiant comeback didn't get her first place and a free trip to Sacramento March 14 for the state competition—that honor belongs to Ventura High School junior Eric Goodman—the senior walked away feeling good about her strong finish.

"I had to," the Simi Valley resident said. "I realized I lost after the first round. I had to stick it through."

The experience was worthwhile.

"I had fun. I was a little intimidated at first with the lights shining in my face," said Holmes, who would have preferred reading something by Charles Bukowski.

Finalists from nine county high schools had to select two poems from a list of about 300 to recite on Wednesday. "I liked O'Hara's poem. He's more of a conversationalist. I felt a lot of people did more emotional poems and had the upper hand. Mine was more subtle poem," said Holmes.

Subtlety won the competition

for Eric Goodman, 15, who read "A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Famous General" by Jonathan Swift and the mystical poet William Blake's "The Tyger."

"I'm still in shock," he said. "I still don't know what to think."

Students were judged by a panel of poets and dignitaries, including Moorpark Councilmember Roseann Mikos, on criteria that included quality in articulation, appropriate dramatization, the poem's level of difficulty, understanding the material and overall performance.

Foothill Technology's Lucas Calderin was the runner-up for his renditions of "Sonnet CXXX" by William Shakespeare and "Kubla Kahn" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Moorpark High junior Haifa Nesheiwat and Royal's Tiffany Bickford also competed in the Poetry Out Loud county competition.

Haifa, 16, who performed "Why I Am Not a Painter" and "Beauty" by Tony Hoagland, said she had only two weeks to memorize a second poem for the countywide event.

"I thought this would be a great experience. I love to speak in front of people," said Haifa, who is four chapters into writing her first novel—as long as her laptop computer hasn't swallowed it up.

Poetry Out Loud was sponsored locally by the Ventura County Arts Council and the High Street Arts Center and nationally by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation. This is the first year Ventura County has participated in this event.

"We've had a great response from all the schools that participated," said Pennie Patterson, the county representative for Poetry Out Loud and the Ventura County Arts Council. "Principals, teachers and students love the program. Next year, the plan is to get all the schools in the county involved. It's a wonderful program."