

Poetry contest lets juvenile offenders shine

By Marjorie Hernandez, The Ventura County Star, Friday, February 15, 2008

Sebastian Garcia took a deep breath and tried to ignore the quick and deep pounding in his chest before he recited the first stanza. Looking out into the audience packed into a small classroom at the Ventura County Probation Agency Juvenile Justice Facility in Oxnard, Garcia tried to remember all the words to Robert Frost's poem "Fire and Ice," which he'd had less than a week to memorize. Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice. From what I've tasted of desire I hold with those who favor fire.

Garcia focused his gaze to the back of the class and tried to temper his fear of speaking in front of a large crowd. He wasn't used to being in front of the class. Before his incarceration and attending Providence School, Garcia felt more comfortable hanging in the streets of Oxnard with his tagging crew than listening to teachers.

All eyes were on Garcia as five judges listened intently to his delivery and examined his poise. The 18-year-old ward quickly finished Frost's last stanza: But if it had to perish twice, I think I know enough of hate to say that for destruction ice is also great and would suffice. As he returned to his seat, Garcia was greeted with a burst of applause from the audience.

Garcia and 25 wards from Oxnard on Wednesday took on famous poets from Frost to Langston Hughes as they participated in the first "Poetry Out Loud" competition at Providence School.

The winner of Providence School's in-house competition will advance to the countywide competition Wednesday at the High Street Art Center in Moorpark. Ventura County's top student will join winners from other California counties at a state championship March 15 in Sacramento and the national finals and semifinals, which will be held April 28 and 29 in Washington, D.C. For the past three years, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation have organized the national poetry competition. The Ventura County Arts Council organized the local competition at nine campuses, including Providence School.

Students can choose from hundreds of approved poems and are judged on several criteria, including volume, articulation and difficulty of the poem. Providence School Principal Martin Manzer said teachers and students jumped at the opportunity to participate when they heard about the competition. With less than a week to prepare, the wards picked out their poems and began working on memorization and delivery. The school even brought in a voice coach to assist the students and provide public speaking pointers, Manzer said.

The coaching not only "helped them in the competition, but they also learned presentation skills and learned what judges and even employers are looking for," Manzer said. "They are learning life skills through this competition that they can carry over with them for the rest of their lives."

U.S. history and English teacher Rob Attleson said participating in the competition is a huge step for his students.

"On one level, this is just a little thing, but for the kids, it's a big deal," Attleson said. "These are gang kids who probably rarely went to class. Even now, there's still a lot of difficulties here that we are overcoming. I can't sit one kid in one side of the classroom because that's where his enemy is sitting. But if there's enough of little efforts like this (contest), they will eventually turn things around."

Providence School and Ventura County Probation Agency administrators said they hope to make more positive changes when the campus starts its new arts program later this month. The school, along with the Ventura County Arts Council and the Probation Agency, developed a multidisciplinary arts curriculum.

Margaret Travers, executive director of the Arts Council, said exposing students to the arts with projects and challenges like the Poetry Out Loud competition provides a positive outlet for students. "It's a demonstration on how the arts can reach kids," Travers said. "They are being exposed to classic poetry that they might never have been exposed to."

For Ward Robert Navarro, 18, Wednesday's poetry competition was not only a confidence-booster, but also a chance to show his mother, Sally Grimes, that he has taken some positive initiatives. Grimes, who was visiting her son the day of the competition, smiled from ear to ear as she listened to him recite "The Gift" by Li-Young Lee. "He's always been competitive so it felt great to see him do good things," Grimes said.