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PHOTO BY PATRICK HYUN WILSON

Junior Lily Bogas from Marin County recites the poem "Diameter" by Michelle Y. Burke. Bogas won the California Poetry Out Loud finals on March 11.

## 'American Idol' for poets

Students perform poems in statewide competition

BY PATRICK HYUN WILSON

Lily Bogas approached the microphone in the state Senate chambers. "You love your friend," she began, through a timid smile. "So you fly across the country to see her."

Reciting the poem "Diameter" by Michelle Y. Burke from memory, her smile wavered as she delivered the next line: "Your friend is grieving."

The poem is about comforting a friend who becomes suicidal after the death of a loved one, but Bogas, a junior from Marin County, performed it with a sense of humor. Using a sarcastic voice, she spoke the line "What did you expect? Ruins?" moving through a series of complex emotions as if she was candidly recounting her own memories.

On Monday, Bogas won California Poetry Out Loud, an annual competition where students memorize and perform poems to a panel of judges, who look at physical presence, voice and articulation and dramatic appropriateness. High schools in 53 California counties held contests to determine their representative for the state finals.

Representing Sacramento County was Naomi Dillard, a senior at Inderkum High School in North Natomas. During Sunday's semi-finals, she passionately recited William Ernest Henley's "Invictus" and Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird."

Both poems have strong themes of freedom and personal achievement that she delivered confidently, looking into the audience as she said, "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

"I don't really do poetry like that, I did it in the classroom and did good, so I just kept going," Dillard said later.

This year, a new competition, Poetry Ourselves, allowed students to submit their own poems. The winner was sophomore Zoya Ahmed of Maria Carillo High School in Sonoma County. Her poem, "A Concerto of Spice," took the audience on a journey through her kitchen, evoking the smells of a traditional Indian-Pakistani meal.

"Writing has never been my strong suit, my first language is Urdu and it's a very poetic language ... my parents just brought poetry as an aspect to it," Ahmed said.

Although Poetry Out Loud has had about 4 million participants nationally since it started, it had a challenging history. When organizer and California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia first proposed the competition in 2005, he was chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Education specialists in every state except California were opposed to the idea, he said.

They said that teenagers didn't like poetry, memorization was repressive and it was degrading to perform the arts in a competition, Gioia said.

"America is a very practical nation, and at some level has never trusted the arts as being particularly valuable. But how practical is an education system ... which fails to engage so many young people?" he asked. "The arts are very practical because they engage students on the completeness of their humanity."

Educators and students were taken with the idea when it was first held in California. By the next year, the other states joined the program.

"You have this tremendous outpouring—dare I call it, love—of all these people who understand that, for some of these kids, this is the only arts program that they're going to encounter," Gioia said.

In April, Bogas will compete at the national competition in Washington, D.C.

"I'm really excited, I'm really nervous, I hope I can do well for California," she said. □