

# Saying it Out Loud: Teen poetry competition gives students the tools to reflect

Teens, poetry and excitement seem like an unlikely combination - but therein lies the magic of Poetry Out Loud. Since 2005, the program has been engaging new generations of students to not only read, but to embrace the rich legacy of this art form by competing to recite a poem, thereby making it their own.

Poetry Out Loud is an arts education program and competition created by The National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation. By working in partnership with state arts agencies, the program has grown to reach more than 4 million students and 65,000 teachers from 16,000 schools. It fulfills a crucial need that has only grown since the advent of the pandemic - an accessible educational program that really motivates students to learn.

"Poetry, when I was a girl, was done in junior high school," said **Martha Lavieri**, program coordinator for Poetry Out Loud RI. "Some ancient English teacher would ask us to memorize 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and it had no meaning to me at all." She noted that for students today, the concept of poetry has been affected by rap and spoken word. "Cadence has changed, storytelling has changed, and social justice dominates the issues expressed," Lavieri told us. "It is far more culturally sensitive, which is a good thing."

Competitors are asked to recite one poem from a curated anthology, and this year's collection is one that high school students can really connect to; the Foundation has been responsive to students' and teachers' desire for poems that reflect ethnic diversity and cultural issues. "We feel like we are working with an organization that is listening," said Lavieri. "They've been doing an outstanding job."

Rhode Island is fortunate to have **Kate Lohman** and *Motif* poetry curator **Damont Combs** to assist in facilitating the program in local classrooms. Both Lohman and Combs are teaching artists who offer a wealth of experience in writing and performing.

Lohman said, "I teach oral communication at Providence College and even there it's hard for students to begin. A poem can get you talking about a topic ... something as personal as being lonely. Teens, especially, have intensely complex emotions, but they don't always have language for what they're feeling. Poems give them a place to start and the means to reflect and process."

"There's such courage in these kids," said Lavieri. "It's not just the poems or the competition - there's a personal story for each one of them. I can't think of anything that I've done in terms of work or career that's given me as much satisfaction as this has - watching the strength of these kids and the dedication of the teachers."

*Poetry Out Loud is supported in RI by the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts. Learn more at the national website [poetryoutloud.org](http://poetryoutloud.org). On March 21 at noon, the 2021 state finals will be streamed live on Zoom; tune in on May 2 for the national semi-finals, and on May 27 for the final match. All events are open to the public - find the Zoom link and updates at [facebook.com/Poetryoutloudri](https://facebook.com/Poetryoutloudri).*