On Monday, February 15, 2016, students from high schools all over the state converged in Montgomery to compete in the Alabama finals of the **Poetry Out Loud National Recitation Competition**. Students, parents, and teachers arrived at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival to recite and to hear the poems. These students, already winners in their own regions, gave moving renditions of poetry from well-known poets such as Jimmy Santiago Baca, Mark Doty, Phillis Wheatley, and Matthew Arnold. The students also performed their own original poems about truth, friendship, personal identity, and tragic life experiences. It was a day filled with laughter, thoughtfulness and tears, proving to all that Alabama students have the power to speak with voices very much worth hearing.

Commenting on this year's program, **Al Head**, Executive Director of the **Alabama State Council on the Arts**, said, "Alabama's Poetry Out Loud program ranks very high nationally having produced finalists and a national champion in the Washington, D.C., competition. Our participating students this year reflected our proud tradition of great talent, composure, and creativity and we congratulate them all for their accomplishments."

First place went to **Raina Versa**, a sophomore at New Century Technology High School in Huntsville. (Teacher, Rebecca Savage-Owens). This was Raina's first year participating in the Poetry Out Loud competition. She will travel to Washington. D.C., all expenses paid, to represent Alabama in the National Finals.

Maggie Stewart, a student from New Hope High School in Cullman came in second place in the statewide competition. Honorable Mentions went to **Andrew Williams** of Robertsdale High School (Teacher, Amanda Givens), **Anna Presnall** of Holy Spirit High School (Teacher, Johnathan Loper), and **Grace Wang** of Auburn High School (Teacher, Davis Thompson).

Alabama also holds an **Original Poetry Competition**. First place went to **Abigail Kunkle** (Teacher, Renee Quaife), a 10th grade student at Sparkman High School in Harvest. She receives a cash award of $150. Second place in original poetry went to **Kaitlyn McClung** (Teacher, Rebecca Savage-Owens) of New Century Technology High School in Huntsville. She receives a cash award of $75. Third place in original poetry went to **Mekiah Hall** (Teacher, Rebecca Savage-Owens).

The **Alabama Writers' Forum** provides the cash awards for the Original Poetry Competition.

Poetry Out Loud is a national arts education program presented by the **National Endowment for the Arts** and the **Poetry Foundation** in partnership with state arts agencies nationwide. This year, Alabama was honored to host **Justine Haka**, a representative from the Poetry Foundation.

The Alabama State Council on the Arts partners with the **Alabama Alliance for Arts Education** and the **Alabama Shakespeare Festival** for this annual event, now in its eleventh year.

The program encourages the mastery of great poetry by offering educational materials and a dynamic competition of high schools across the country. Poetry Out Loud uses a pyramid structure. Beginning at the classroom level, winners advance to a school-wide competition, regional competitions, the state competition, and ultimately to the National Finals in Washington, D.C., in May.

The winner of the Alabama finals of Poetry Out Loud is awarded $200, and the student's school receives a $500 stipend for the purchase of poetry books. The second place winner receives $100, and the student's school receives $200 for the school library. The Poetry Out Loud National Finals will award a total of $50,000 in scholarships and school stipends with a $20,000 college scholarship for the Poetry Out Loud National Champion.

For additional information about this event, please contact Diana Green, Arts in Education Program Manager, Alabama State Council on the Arts: 334-242-4076 Ext. 241 or by email at Diana.green@arts.alabama.gov or Donna Russell, Executive Director, Alabama Alliance for Arts Education, 334-269-1435 or donnarussell@alaae.org

Photo: Raina Versa (*Julian*)