

Creative Grounds and Poetry Out Loud fertile territory for nurturing teen poets

by Romaine Washington

When I mention Poetry Out Loud to people the response I usually get is, “It sounds familiar, but I am not sure what it is.” Because we live in a society where money (not poetry) speaks loudest, I say, “It is a contest where the national winner is awarded \$20,000.” The response is a look of surprise followed by questions.

Is it slam poetry? No. No props. No singing. No slam.

These are high school students giving voice and passion to poetry; this is Poetry Out Loud. In slam poetry students have to pay a fee to compete. In Poetry Out Loud there is no fee. Students are not reading their own work and they do not have the stress of being judged on their engaging writing skills, and delivery of an exuberant performance to sway an audience. The main focus is for students to understand, memorize, and recite (bring to life) two poems they choose from the [Poetry Out Loud website](#).

The 2022 winner was Mia Ronn from Los Angeles. I say this because, Los Angeles is a neighbor city and I know we tend to think, “If my neighbor can do it why can’t I?” With no entry fee, and the main requirements are time and commitment, there is equal opportunity for success.

As the San Bernardino County program coordinator and a former Poetry Out Loud judge, I have had the opportunity to talk to some of the students after competitions. I remember one conversation where the student asked why he didn’t win. I asked the student how he chose the poem he recited. He said he chose it to impress the judges. That was the problem; he did not have an authentic connection with the poem. It is crucial for students to peruse the anthology and find a poem they truly like and want to get to know.

The online anthology has the classics from [Shakespeare](#), [Longfellow](#), [Dickinson](#), [Poe](#), [Blake](#), [Whitman](#), and [T.S. Eliot](#), and more. Most students are already familiar with their work. These are the poets that come to mind when I mention the program, but there is so much more.

The Poetry Out Loud anthology is vast and varied from contemporary local poets [Juan Delgado](#) and [Nikki Grimes](#), to the poet who created a new form, The Golden Shovel, [Terrance Hayes](#) and [Jericho Brown](#) who created the duplex form. Four-time champion of the National Poetry Slam [Patricia Smith](#), U.S. Poet Laureate (2019-2022) [Joy Harjo](#), [Natalie Diaz](#) who has a stunning abecedarian on the site, and the current U.S. Poet Laureate [Ada Limon](#). I get giddy over the thought of knowing a poet’s work and having the chance to meet them! As a teacher, I remember my students being in awe when they met Jericho Brown and Juan Delgado.

In the [Psychology Today article](#), How Poetry Can Heal, Diana Raab, Ph.D. declares “Poems reflect the voice of the soul... Poetry encourages a certain interconnectedness and helps establish a sense of community between oneself and others. In other words, poetry can help us feel as if we’re part of a larger picture and not just living in our isolated little world.”

To extend the experience of connectedness in poetry, the owners of Creative Grounds Art Studio, educator, Duan of Skoolboiz Screen Printing, and Jay, DNO have opened their doors to nurture a monthly teen open mic. These owners are rooted in the San Bernardino creative community with Zinefest, and the monthly Art Walk. Creative Grounds 395 N. E St. Unit 101B is the perfect location for a teen open mic. Visitors are greeted with a social justice mural, a poem unto itself, followed by multi-colored arms raised in unison and across from the mural is a peaceful wall garden.

The perfect host for the teen open mic is poet and educator, Micah Tasaka. In a recent interview, she revealed that she used to be “super shy” but poetry and spoken word helped her to open up and gave her confidence. From personal experience, she believes poetry can be transformative.

Readings are scheduled 4 – 6 PM on the following dates October 13, November 17, December 15, and January 19. The plan is for the open mic to become a hybrid online and in person depending on student interest and participation.

Between Creative Grounds, Arts Walk, collective galleries, The Garcia Center, Poetry Out Loud, Arts Connection, and Inlandia writing workshops and community programs the Inland Empire is building space for creativity and connectedness.

Visit the [Poetry Out Loud](#) website and contact Romaine Washington at poetromiane@gmail.com for more detailed information.

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