

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with state arts agencies created Poetry Out Loud to foster the next generation of literary readers through recitation and performance.

The Virginia Commission for the Arts acknowledges the dedication of 2,634 students from 31 high schools and local organizations who participated in Poetry Out Loud with 24 champions competing in three virtual semifinal competitions. The Virginia state champion receives a \$200 cash prize, a \$500 stipend towards poetry books for their school, and an all-expense paid trip to Washington D.C. to compete for the national championship and the top prize of \$20,000. The runner-up receives a \$100 cash prize and a \$200 stipend towards poetry books for their school. The Poetry Out Loud National Championships takes place April 27-29, 2026.

The Virginia Commission for the Arts proudly partners with The Wayne Theatre in the administration, production, and live streaming of Poetry Out Loud: The Virginia Finals.

The VCA and Wayne Theatre also acknowledge and thank Lighthouse Studio, Charlottesville, for their digital support for the semifinal competitions, and Mosaic Interpreting Services for giving accessibility to all audiences



## THE WAYNE THEATRE

would like the Waynesboro Community, Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind and Jenilee Fletcher, and all the technicians, judges, and educators who assisted in this event.



21<sup>ST</sup> ANNUAL

VIRGINIA



STATE FINALS:

**MARCH 5, 2026**

**2:00 pm**

WAYNE THEATRE • 521 W. Main St. • Waynesboro, VA 22980



# WELCOME

Welcome to the 21st annual Poetry Out Loud Virginia Finals!

When interviewing students during semi-finals, I found myself feeling so comforted that each competitor HAS these poems, forever. Like a ballerina's muscle memory or a phantom limb, they might be in their 80's and hear the opening few words of their competition poem, and the rest will flow from them unbidden. That is a beautiful and powerful thing. These students have gained so much from this experience, new skills, new friends, new confidence-but they also HAVE these poems, forever. This experience is so lovingly described in Amanda Gorman's Poem, "Memorial", below, which I hope brings you as much joy as it has brought me.

The Wayne Theatre is proud to work with the Virginia Commission for the Arts and is honored and excited to be a part of this year's Poetry Out Loud. We acknowledge the countless contributions of those involved and are filled with gratitude for the many collaborators serving as patrons of the arts and arts education, and as contributing voices to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Thank you for sharing this moment, and for shining a light on the significant experience that is the 2025-2026 Poetry Out Loud!

**Corey Holmes**

Virginia Poetry Out Loud State Coordinator

# 20 YEARS OF WINNERS

2006	<b>JOHNNY COYLE</b>	2016	<b>AHKEI TOGUN</b> <i>NATIONAL CHAMPION</i>
2007	<b>ALANNA RIVERA</b>	2017	<b>JESSICA HOWARD</b>
2008	<b>TIA ROBINSON</b>	2018	<b>REMKA NWANA</b>
2009	<b>WILLIAM FARLEY</b> <i>NATIONAL CHAMPION</i>	2019	<b>KATHERINE NGUYEN</b>
2010	<b>TIA ROBINSON</b>	2020	<b>KATHERINE NGUYEN</b>
2011	<b>CAROL V. DECKER</b>	2021	<b>AZHANE POLLARD</b>
2012	<b>ELLEN HOWERTON</b>	2022	<b>KATHARINA RAVICHANDRAN</b>
2013	<b>MIRANDA WACK</b>	2023	<b>EVALYNN BOGUSZ</b>
2014	<b>ISABELLE ANDREWS</b>	2024	<b>MILLA HARTFORD</b>
2015	<b>AHKEI TOGUN</b>	2025	<b>NADIA SHALABY</b>

## Memorial

By Amanda Gorman in *Call Us What We Cary*

When we tell a story,

We are living

Memory.

In ancient Greece, the Muses, the dainty-footed daughters of Memory, were thought to inspire artists. It isn't knowing, but remembering, that makes us create. This would explain why so much great art arises from trauma, nostalgia, or testimony.

But why alliteration?

Why the pulsing percussion, the string of syllables?

It is the poet who pounds the past back into you.

The poet transcends "telling" or "performing" a story & instead remembers it, touches, tastes, traps its vastness.

Only now can Memory, previously marooned, find safe harbor within us. Feel all the tales crushing our famished mouth.





PRESENTED BY



# 2026 COMPETITORS

**Reese Fleming**  
Collegiate School

**Alley Gongloff**  
Bassett High School

**Claire Kilmartin**  
Heritage High School

**Aoife Donohue**  
Catholic High School

**Natalie Faust**  
Washington Liberty High School

**Amelia Rylak**  
Grace Christian School

- **WELCOME** By Casey Polczynski, PhD, Deputy Director | Accessibility Coordinator, Virginia Commission for the Arts
- **INTRODUCTION OF HOST AND JUDGES** Chris Johnston and Judges
- **ROUND ONE OF POEMS RECITATIONS**
- **PERFORMANCE** By Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind performers (Jaxton Mandracken “Winter Door”, Travis Korzeniowski “Sled Dog”, Ethan Whitworth “Mug”, and Kiryn Brackett “Gray Wolf”)
- **10 MINUTE INTERMISSION**
- **ROUND TWO OF POEMS RECITATIONS**
- **PERFORMANCE** By Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind performers (Korbin Smith “Hockey Puck”, Jowan Bryant “Polar Bear”, Landon Antonini “Ice Blocks/Tongs”, and Jackson Winslow “Snowman”)
- **10 MINUTE INTERMISSION**
- **ANNOUNCEMENT OF TOP 3 FINALISTS**
- **PERFORMANCE** By Chris Johnston
- **ROUND THREE POEMS RECITATIONS** Leading 3 Contestants
- **CLOSING REMARKS** By TBD
- **ANNOUNCEMENT OF WINNERS** By Chris Johnston
- **PRESENTATION OF AWARDS** By Mattie Quesenberry Smith



## VIRGINIA COMMISSION FOR THE ARTS

On behalf of the Virginia Commission for the Arts (VCA), I am proud to recognize and celebrate our three-year partnership with the Wayne Theatre in coordinating and hosting Poetry Out Loud.

Through this collaboration in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Wayne Theatre has provided exceptional management, venue support, and community engagement to ensure the program’s continued success. Their commitment to artistic excellence and youth development has helped elevate student voices and expand access to high-quality arts education experiences throughout the Commonwealth.

Together, we have strengthened Poetry Out Loud’s statewide impact—empowering students to build confidence, public speaking skills, and a deeper appreciation for literature. The Wayne Theatre’s professionalism, dedication, and leadership have been instrumental in sustaining and growing this important initiative.

We are grateful for this strong collaboration and look forward to continued success in serving Virginia’s students and communities through the arts.

Sincerely,

*Colleen Dugan Messick*

Colleen Dugan Messick, Executive Director

# THE HOST

## CHRIS JOHNSTON



Chris Johnston is an actor, educator, and music director who has performed all over the country for theaters such as The American Shakespeare Center, Salt Lake Shakespeare, Black Dog Theatre Company (founding member), and The Egyptian Theatre Company. He received his MFA in Shakespeare & Performance from Mary Baldwin University and his BFA from the University of Utah's Actor Training Program. Currently, he is the Director of Music for Highland County Public Schools and runs their drama department.

# THE JUDGES



**LAUREN MINER, ACCURACY JUDGE:** Lauren Miner is an educator, writer, and visual artist, based in Richmond, Virginia. She teaches writing at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond and at Randolph-Macon College, where she is the faculty advisor for the student literary journal, *The Stylus*, and she has led creative-writing workshops at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond

Young Writers, Henrico County Public Library and elsewhere. As the first Artist-in-Residence for the James River Park System, Miner facilitated a series of outdoor writing workshops, open to the public, at various locations within the park system, where participants could create and share work inspired by the surrounding natural environment. Miner has also served as a copy editor on the staff of *Blackbird* and an assistant poetry editor at the *Four Way Review*. She holds an MFA in creative writing and an MA in English from Virginia Commonwealth University.



**WENDY PETERSON, PERFORMANCE JUDGE:** Wendy Peterson is a multi-genre writer who received her MFA in Creative Writing and Literature from Stony Brook University. While there, she taught an undergraduate creative writing course that introduced students to different genres—poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—while encouraging students to discover their own voices and to build a foundation

of curious play when they approached their own writing. Wendy also holds a B.A. in Literary Studies from Delaware Valley University where she conducted her senior thesis on LGBTQ+ Poetry. Her writing has been published in several literary magazines including *Maudlin House*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *October Hill Magazine*, *The Southampton Review*, and *The New Absurdist*. When not writing, she can be found on stage with her local community theatre or walking around trying to get lost in the woods.



**KELSEY HARRISON, PERFORMANCE JUDGE:** Kelsey Harrison is elated to be a judge for Poetry Out Loud! She recently made her Wayne directorial debut with *The Woman in Black* in special presentation with the Wellington Venue. Favorite Wayne acting credits include *Scrooge!* (Ghost of Christmas Past), *Romeo and Juliet* (Lady Capulet), Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (Masha), and *Pride and Prejudice* (Jane Bennet). A classically trained actor, Kelsey holds an MFA and MLitt in Shakespeare and Performance from Mary Baldwin University and a BFA in Musical Theatre from Viterbo University. When not onstage, Kelsey is also a director and teaching artist with Studio Wayne, Eunoia Theatre, Silk Moth Stage, and Albemarle Ballet Theatre, as well as an adjunct professor of acting at Southern Virginia University.



**MATTIE QUESENBERRY SMITH, PERFORMANCE JUDGE:** Mattie Quesenberry Smith, Ph.D., is Virginia's Poet Laureate, 2024-2026, and an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow, 2025-2026. Generously supported by the Academy's fellowship, she facilitates a statewide civic project,

"Perseverance and Resilience: Supporting Veterans through Poetry," also known as the Veterans Poetry Project (VPP). In 2024, Smith earned a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Virginia Tech, where she learned to facilitate integrative design-based teaching and learning in STEM and humanistic studies through critical reflective writing. Raised in Appalachia, Smith explores the natural world through place-based creative writing where poetry and science often collide. She lives at the foot of House Mountain in Lexington, Virginia.



**AMY IPPOLITO, PERFORMANCE JUDGE:** Amy Ippolito is a professional actor, dancer, and theater educator originally from New York. She holds a BA in Dance and Theater from Manhattanville University, as well as two master's degrees from Mary Baldwin University where she was an acting concentration in the Shakespeare and Performance program.

She spent a season at the American Shakespeare Center as an Acting Fellow where she went on for *Rosalind* in *As You Like It* and *Belle* in *A Christmas Carol*. Amy is a Broadway World Award winner for her portrayal of Lady Anne in *Richard III* with East End Mobil Theater. Most recently she played Hamlet in *Hamlet* with Northeast Stage in New York, and she will be returning this summer to play Desdemona in *Othello* with Northeast Stage in New York. You can find her teaching at The Wayne Theater in Waynesboro, a member of The Wayne's ReperTOURy Company, as well as having played Mercutio and Prince in their most recent production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

