

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **ALABAMA'S CHAMPION SOARS TO THE TOP IN POETRY OUT LOUD NATIONAL COMPETITION**

Montgomery, Ala. - The Alabama State Council on the Arts is pleased to announce that Youssef Biaz, from Auburn High School, placed top in the nation Friday evening, April 29 for the *Poetry Out Loud* National Poetry Recitation Contest in Washington D.C. On the first day of the two-day competition Youssef placed in the top 3 of the semi-finals, competing against central states and Puerto Rico. At the finals on the second day, competing as one of the top 9 finalists, he placed once again in the top 3, and as we watched from Alabama by UStream, he delivered his final poem, *Filling Station* by Elizabeth Bishop, which solicited audience response for every line. This poem took him to first place. For this honor he receives a scholarship award of \$20,000, and his school library receives a \$500 stipend for the purchase of poetry books. Youssef was accompanied in Washington, by his teacher, Davis Thompson, his parents and sisters, and Donna Russell from the Alabama Alliance for Arts in Education.

Converging on Washington, DC, April 28-29, 2011 to compete in the nation's largest youth poetry recitation competition, 53 high school student competitors from across the country advanced from a field of more than 365,000 students who tested their skills in poetry recitation in more than 2,000 schools nationwide. Award-winning actress Kerry Washington, a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, hosted the evening finals on Friday. Guest judges for the National Finals are poets Valerie Martínez, Thomas Sayers Ellis, and Brian Turner, actress and author Amber Tamblyn, playwright/actress/director Aditi Brennan Kapil, and Michael Kahn, Artistic Director of the Shakespeare Theatre Company.

Now in its sixth year of national competition, *Poetry Out Loud* is a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, which encourages the study of great poetry by offering educational materials and a dynamic recitation competition to high schools students across the country. Poetry Out Loud gives students an opportunity to master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about their literary heritage.

The Alabama State Council on the Arts partners with the Alabama Alliance for Arts in Education to implement the program in Alabama. Alabama is fortunate to have four Regional coordinators to ensure statewide participation. Regional coordinators are Sue Walker, at the University of South Alabama, Mobile; Jackie Trimble, at Huntingdon College, Montgomery; Sharron Rudowski, at Tuscaloosa Arts Council, in Tuscaloosa; and Rose Norman, at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. The state finals were held for the first time on the Festival Stage at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery. The Council is grateful for these valuable partners who share in our success.

Schools that are interested in registering for next year's Poetry Out Loud should contact Diana Green at 334/242-4076 Ext 241 or by email at [diana.green@arts.alabama.gov](mailto:diana.green@arts.alabama.gov). More information is available at [www.poetryoutloud.org](http://www.poetryoutloud.org).

## **Contests and Awards**

Using a pyramid structure, Poetry Out Loud in Alabama starts with classroom and schoolwide activities and contests between August and November 2010. Regional competitions are held in December 2011 and the Alabama State contest takes place in February. The 53 champions of contests in every state, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Washington, DC compete at the National Finals. The Poetry Out Loud National Finals present a total of \$50,000 in awards and school stipends for the purchase of poetry books. Awards include \$20,000 for the Poetry Out Loud National Champion, and \$10,000 and \$5,000 for the second- and third-place finalists. Each state-level final has awarded \$1,000 in cash awards to the champion, runner up, and their schools. In total, Poetry Out Loud will award more than \$100,000 to state- and national-level winners.

## **About the Alabama State Council on the Arts**

The Alabama State Council on the Arts is the official state arts agency of Alabama. The staff of the Council, directed by Al Head, administers the grants programs and provides technical assistance in arts planning and programming. The Council receives its support through an annual appropriation from the Alabama Legislature and funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

## **About the Alabama Alliance for Arts Education**

AAAE supports and advocates for policies, practices, and partnerships that promote excellence in arts education. The Alabama Alliance for Arts Education is a member of the Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education Network and is a statewide partnership program of the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

## **About the National Endowment for the Arts**

The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$4 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector. To join the discussion on how art works, visit the NEA at [www.arts.gov](http://www.arts.gov).

## **About the Poetry Foundation**

The Poetry Foundation, publisher of Poetry magazine, is an independent literary organization committed to a vigorous presence for poetry in our culture. It exists to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience. The Poetry Foundation seeks to be a leader in shaping a receptive climate for poetry by developing new audiences, creating new avenues for delivery, and encouraging new kinds of poetry through innovative literary prizes and programs. For more information, please visit [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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*Two photos of Yousseff Biaz, the 2011 National Poetry Out Loud Champion from Auburn High School, Auburn, Alabama are attached. Please credit photos to James Kegley.*