



Oregon

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NEWS RELEASE

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OYA kids take top honors in national poetry contest

Chelsea Clinton among the judges who reviewed more than a thousand poems

An 18-year-old girl in the care of the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) finished first in a national poetry contest, with poems by three other at-risk youth in the agency's custody tying for third place.

Brianna Nicole Ireland's poem, "Hell's Angel," took top honors at [Words Unlocked](#), a competition sponsored by the [Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings \(CEEAS\)](#). [Chelsea Clinton](#) was among four judges who ranked Ireland's poem first out of more than a thousand entries nationwide. Ireland's hometown is Eugene, Ore.

Poems by three other OYA youth tied for third place: "As the Grass Grows" by Stephen Jerome Fowler, 21 (hometown: Portland, Ore.); "Tell Me About Me" by Angela Denise Miller, 19 (hometown: Salem, Ore.); and "Split Personality" by Angel Whisper, 19 (hometown: Springfield, Ore.).

Ireland, Miller and Whisper are held at the all-girls Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility (YCF) in Albany and Fowler is at MacLaren YCF in Woodburn. A total of 16 OYA youth submitted poems for the competition.

"The outcome of this competition proves what we already know about many of our kids: That their creativity, imagination and drive are not diminished because they are incarcerated," said [OYA Director Fariborz Pakseresht](#). "It also proves that we have some of the best educational programs among juvenile justice agencies in the country, staffed by some of the most dedicated and resourceful instructors and principals who teach and mentor at-risk youth. On

behalf of everyone at OYA, I congratulate Brianna, Stephen, Angela, Angel and the other youth who submitted poems. They are all winners.”

April was National Poetry Month and entries for Words Unlocked were due May 3. Senior staff from OYA headquarters in Salem notified the youth in person last week. Youth in more than 40 correctional facilities throughout the U.S. participated in the competition.

“We have been overwhelmed both by the number students who submitted poems and the quality and honesty of their works,” said [David Domenici](#), CEEAS executive director. “We are proud of the students in OYA facilities who participated in the initiative, and we deeply appreciate the support that the adults—teachers, principals, and OYA leadership—showed by encouraging the students to participate and express themselves.”

In addition to Clinton, judges for the competition included [Bryonn Bain](#), [R. Dwayne Betts](#) and [John Blake](#). CEEAS will award Ireland \$100 and the third place finishers \$25 each. All top finishers will also receive certificates, publication of their works in the first annual Words Unlocked poetry anthology, and a signed copy of *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison* by Betts.

[Click here](#) to read the top-ranked poems.

NOTE: Reporters may submit requests to interview the OYA youth who wrote the poems to C. J. Drake at CJ.Drake@oya.state.or.us or at 503-385-5899. Youth may be interviewed only with their consent. Because they are in correctional facilities, their availability to conduct interviews is limited and must be scheduled in advance at OYA’s discretion.

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The Oregon Youth Authority is the state's juvenile justice agency, reducing victimization by helping at-risk young people lead productive, crime-free lives. Learn more at www.oregon.gov/oya and follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/oregonyouth.

The purpose of the Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings is to maximize teaching and learning in alternative schools. Its mission is to help alternative schools—in community settings and in locked facilities—implement transformational, student-focused practices, designed to significantly improve the life chances of the students they serve. Learn more at www.ceeas.org.