



# Oregon

John A. Kitzhaber, MD, Governor

## Oregon Youth Authority

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## **OYA youth awarded first place in national poetry contest**

***Chelsea Clinton was on panel that judged poems by at-risk youth across U.S.***



*Teacher Kim DeForest (left) with Aaron.*

A panel of judges that included Chelsea Clinton has awarded first place in a national contest to a poem written by Aaron, an at-risk youth in the care of Oregon's juvenile justice agency.

Aaron's poem, "[Meth,](#)" took top honors in [Words Unlocked](#), a poetry competition sponsored by the [Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings \(CEEAS\)](#). Clinton was among four judges who ranked Aaron's poem first out of 430 entries nationwide. Aaron, 20, has been held

since 2013 by the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) at Rogue Valley Youth Correctional Facility in Grants Pass. His hometown is Roseburg, Oregon.

This is the second consecutive year that a poem written by a youth in OYA's care took first place in the Words Unlocked competition. Last year's winner was a young woman from Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility in Albany, Oregon who took top honors for her poem, ["Hell's Angel."](#) This year's second place winner, Mariah, wrote her poem at the Marion County Juvenile Detention Center in Salem, Oregon.

"The accomplishments of Aaron and the other youth recognized by Words Unlocked prove that incarceration doesn't need to stifle creative expression," said OYA Director Fariborz Pakseresht. "Our youth are talented, and so are the educators who serve them. I commend Aaron, his teachers and all the other young poets for being courageous enough to express themselves and to submit their work for judging in a national competition."

A total of 98 youth in local or state custody in Oregon submitted poems for the competition. "Meth" and poems by seven other OYA youth will be published in the [Words Unlocked 2014 Anthology](#).

"A number of English teachers working inside OYA facilities are doing a terrific job developing the writing skills of students in their care," said David Domenici, CEEAS executive director. "It isn't a coincidence that so many OYA students are producing such meaningful, creative poems in the last two years. It is a testament to the teachers and their commitment to making teaching and learning relevant, engaging and rigorous."

At Rogue Valley, Aaron is a student at Newbridge High School, operated at the facility by the [Three Rivers School District](#). He already has his GED and is working toward graduating from high school June 24.

Aaron credited teacher Kim DeForest for encouraging his creativity. "If it wasn't for her that poem wouldn't have been entered in the competition," he said. DeForest praised Words Unlocked for "giving me the opportunity to have my students read and watch spoken poetry at a greater depth than I would have been able to do on my own. Having the opportunity to hear such personal stories being told as poems helped my students realize that words can be powerful, even if the word count is small."

Aaron and DeForest will be featured on National Public Radio's ["Weekend Edition" program](#) Sunday, June 8. [Check local stations for air times.](#)

April was National Poetry Month and entries for Words Unlocked were due in May. In addition to Clinton, [judges for the competition](#) included Reginald Dwayne Betts, Joaquin Zihuatanejo and Josh Lefkowitz. For placing first, Aaron will receive a certificate, inclusion in the [Words Unlocked 2014 Anthology](#), a signed copy of Zihuatanejo's book, "Family Tree," and a \$100 cash prize.

[Read Aaron's poem here.](#)

[Click here to read all the Words Unlocked winning poems.](#)

NOTE: Reporters may submit requests to interview OYA youth to C. J. Drake at [CJ.Drake@oya.state.or.us](mailto:CJ.Drake@oya.state.or.us) or by calling 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](http://www.oregon.gov/oya) and follow OYA on Twitter @OregonYouth*

*The Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings maximizes 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.cceas.org](http://www.cceas.org) and follow CEEAS on Twitter @SecondChanceEDU*