

& THE PATH IT'S CARVING FOR SOUTH DAKOTA'S YOUTH

For students, high school can be complicated: they're planning for their futures, studying for the next big test, balancing after-school activities, alongside all of the other adult-sized problems they run into along the way. Teachers and parents are there for guidance, but don't always get to see the bigger picture. Three former Sioux Falls high school students, however, found their own way to alleviate the stress that comes with a constantly evolving world through the high school program, Poetry Out Loud.

For recent Washington High School graduate Rahele Megosha, the reigning Poetry Out Loud National Champion, poetry provided an outlet for her to express herself in a comfortable and safe setting. "I found that I could have a type of emotional release from performing and telling my story," said Megosha. "But it wasn't direct in the sense that I exposed specific details of my life." Seeing the correlation between poetry and her personal life experiences inspired Megosha, and she isn't the only one to be influenced by the free high school program.

Former Lincoln High School student Maddie Lukomski discovered poetry through oral interpretation and never looked back. "Poetry Out Loud provided an outlet for me to recite these classic poems that mean so much to the world, and for me to write my own stuff," said Lukomski. Her love for the medium pushed her to perform at her best and earned her two expense-free trips to Washington D.C. to compete in the national competition where she was crowned National Champion in the original poetry category in her first year.

Lukomski's work didn't go unnoticed by her peers, and even inspired another future national's competitor in Gage Gramlick. "I thought she was the coolest," said Gramlick. "And I was correct." Before Poetry Out Loud, however, Gramlick thought of poetry as a complex piece of art that wasn't easily accessible or understandable. This viewpoint didn't last long after he realized that, aside from poetry being a way to express yourself, it's also a way to influence change. "It definitely changed course for me about understanding how to do activism or how to just communicate in general," said Gramlick. It was through these experiences that each of the former high school students realized what they were experiencing through Poetry Out Loud was much deeper than understanding the material.

High school students across the country have taken part in Poetry Out Loud's free educational materials and recitation competitions. Lessons are designed to help students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary history and contemporary life. When Megosha won the national competition, and received a check for \$20,000 to spend as she pleases, it was a moment that proved to her that she could amount to the goals she sets for herself: which is something money can't buy. "It showed me you don't necessarily have to be talented in that sense to connect to it and express yourself through it," said Megosha. "This is why I think it's important that a future bio-chem major from Sioux Falls won, because it showed that you don't have to be an actress or in the performing arts to express yourself." The definition of success varies from

person to person, and while his experience was similar, Gramlick was able to put that concept into perspective with a little help from his mother's affinity for podcasts. "She was talking about something she heard dealing with the importance of seeing outside of where you are," said Gramlick. "I feel like Poetry Out Loud does that really well by showing you that you can be from South Dakota and go to D.C. and do these amazing things." Seeing the fruit of their labor was one thing, but for Lukomski it was an opportunity she considered life changing. "I think I was on a different course," said Lukomski. "Then I did Poetry Out Loud, and it veered me off to a completely new one because I saw what it was doing for kids." The personal skills that each of the students learned helped them succeed in the program, but they've also translated into their futures long after their last performance.

Gramlick has been enrolled in The University of Chicago for the last three years since his high school graduation. He plans on going into law school to study international or immigration law, and his previous experience with Poetry Out Loud has helped him prepare for some of his biggest challenges. "Being able to read something, critically think about it, notate it, and then communicate it is a big part of what I have to do at school," said Gramlick. "I'm studying for the LSAT and truly it is the same thing."

Lukomski continues to perform on stage and was recently in the Sioux Empire Community Theatre's production of Footloose. Her experience with Poetry Out Loud inspired her to continue to share the love she has for poetry and has even considered publishing her own work. "Poetry Out Loud did so much for me as a person," said Lukomski. "They give kids something to craft and to work on and to show people, and it's so important to give kids that."

Since graduating in the Spring of 2021 she has committed to Columbia in New York City on a full-ride scholarship to study biochemistry. Though she won't be in South Dakota often Megosha plans on being an advocate for the community she represents. While unsure what awaits her at school, she's confident in her abilities to interact with others and build connections. "I think with any career you have to interact with people in a way that's beneficial for them and yourself," said Megosha. "I definitely feel like poetry has provided a gateway into connecting with people on a deeper level."

ABOUT POETRY OUT LOUD:

Poetry Out Loud is a national arts education program that encourages the study of great poetry by offering free educational materials and a dynamic recitation competition for high school students across the country. This program helps students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary history and contemporary life. Poetry Out Loud is a partnership of the National Endowment for the Arts, Poetry Foundation, and the state and jurisdictional arts agencies.

Since 2005, Poetry Out Loud has grown to reach more than 4.1 million students and 68,000 teachers from 17,000 schools and organizations in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, and American Samoa.

