

## A poet, an actress, a gifted student

*Aryiel Everett takes her Poetry Out Loud experience to college this fall*

by Shea Conner

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One day, Aryiel Everett, a student at Park Hill South High School in Riverside, Mo., was asked by her teacher to do an assignment. The assignment was to pick a poem off of [www.poetryoutloud.com](http://www.poetryoutloud.com) and recite it for the class. Everett decided she would perform "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes. When she was asked to perform, she blew her class away.

"I did mine and everyone's mouth was open. They were like 'You memorized it?'" the 18-year-old Ms. Everett says.

It was at that moment that Ms. Everett realized she was a little more in to reciting poetry than her fellow students. Because she was so good at performing, her teacher, Dr. Lora Ackerman, decided to send Ms. Everett to a regional competition for Poetry Out Loud in St. Joseph in March. After her performances of "Theme for English B," "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe and "Susie Asado" by Gertrude Stein, the judges thought she was the best in the region.

Winning the regional competition meant Everett would go to the state competition later that month. Ms. Everett and Dr. Ackerman got to preparing for the competition in Jefferson City right away.

"I performed at least 30 times before state," Ms. Everett says. "I performed for several classes and pretty much anyone that wanted to see it."

The state competition made Ms. Everett very nervous. There were other students there who had been reciting poetry throughout their high school years. There was even one student who had his performances on the Internet. After seeing the others perform, however, Ms. Everett's anxiousness went away and she shined brightly.

"She was head and shoulders above the competition at Jefferson City," says Kathy Hill-Bahner, who attended the event.

When Ms. Everett was named Missouri state champion, she couldn't believe it.

"It was a surreal experience," Ms. Everett recalls. "They named me the winner and I just started crying. My mom and Dr. Ackerman were hugging. My dad was crying. I was just so proud because I felt like I accomplished something."

The national finals were held in late April in Washington. Ms. Everett, her family and Dr. Ackerman all made the trip to the nation's capital. While her parents went sight-seeing, Ms. Everett prepared for her performance and mingled with the other 51 competitors.

"I made about 20 really good friends," Ms. Everett explains. "I talked to the girl from Alaska a lot. You know, it was kind of like a beauty pageant. People wouldn't call each other by name. They would say, 'hey Missouri,' or 'hey Alaska,' or 'hey California.'"

Ms. Everett didn't win the national finals, but she took something more out of the time she spent in Washington. She made several friends, toured the White House, and saw many of the best Poetry Out Loud performances she will ever see. "For me, it was all about the experience," she says.

Since April, Ms. Everett has taken her poetry to new places. She now performs her original poetry along with classic poems like "The Weary Blues" by Langston Hughes. She performed at the Fringe Festival and the Blue Room at the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City. She even performed two poems at the Allied Arts Council's annual meeting in St. Joseph in July.

"She is a dynamic and phenomenal performer," says Hill-Bahner, former president of the Allied Arts Council.

This fall, Ms. Everett will attend Missouri State University. Originally, Ms. Everett was going to major in interior design, but she has now added theater as a double major after being actively involved with Poetry Out Loud.

"You have to do what do what you love," Ms. Everett says.

For more information on the Poetry Out Loud program, visit [www.poetryoutloud.org](http://www.poetryoutloud.org).

Lifestyles reporter Shea Conner can be reached

at [sheaconner@npgco.com](mailto:sheaconner@npgco.com)