

The 7th Grade Poetry Foundation™

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Event Celebrates 7th Graders' Poetic "Writes of Passage"

St. Louis, MO / March 31, 2016—"Student Poetry Matters" is the battle cry of The 7th Grade Poetry Foundation (7GP) and their upcoming event is a celebration of what students say with a pen in their hands.

In seven programming years, 7GP, a 501(c)(3) charity based in St. Louis, and its founder Aaron Williams asked educators to invite 40,000 seventh-grade students to write poems of their choice for school-based poetry writing contests, with half submitting poems for the competition. To date, the educational literary arts initiative has resulted in 550 7GP 7th Grade Poets Laureate celebrated nationwide.

The 2016 7GP program culminates in a celebration of winning words combining live poetry readings by Missouri and Illinois students and filmed readings from student poets in 16 other states. The event will be held in the main auditorium of the Missouri History Museum, Wednesday, April 13, 2016, in two sessions, each offering up to 52 poems. The free event is open to the public, with start times of 4:45 P.M. and 6:45 P.M. Central Daylight Time. For those unable to attend, the event will be livestreamed and viewable in real time over the Internet via the charity's website www.7GP.org.

7GP donates all program materials and incentives. Each winning poet receives \$25 and is invited to read their poem before a live audience or send a filmed reading. Students, their educators, schools and public libraries each receive a donated copy of *Poetry on Our Terms*, the poetry anthology in which the students are published. This year's book includes a foreword written by the current U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera. The first St. Louis Poet Laureate, Michael Castro, will be among the award presenters at the event.

In this current school year, 7GP reached out to 1,500 schools nationwide, resulting in 104 participating by inviting 8,500 7th graders to compete in a contest coinciding with the specific grade when most schools offer curriculum involving poetry. Nearly every participating educator indicated that the program helped teach poetry and achieve curriculum goals. In an era of standardized testing, poetry writing also offers students a chance to be recognized beyond their exam scores.

The program coincides with when many students experience the complex and exciting transition from childhood to young adolescence. For 7th graders, changes occur culturally, physically, emotionally, and educationally. At a midpoint from a kindergarten-to-12th-grade education, 7GP provides an opportunity for a "write of passage" that would give students a chance to have the freedom of creative self-expression that poetry offers. "Anyone can write a great poem and everyone deserves that chance" is a mindset that Williams champions in the work of the charity.

Outreach included students of every ability and background in all types of schools and locations. Participating schools included faith-based, private nonsectarian, charter and public and came from urban, suburban and rural settings. For many students, the program resulted in the first time, at age 13, that they heard, "You won!" Eighty percent of educators said that they did not expect the specific student they selected to be the winner. Many students were inspired to write their best work leading up to the element of a surprise outcome from an all-inclusive competition that begins and ends at the school. Knowing the poems would be shared beyond classroom walls also motivated many students to write poems.

Providing a written opportunity for students to fill a blank page or screen with literary artistic freedom is a challenge shared by all writers. When given this chance, the result is a welcome diversity of themes and poetry forms. The contest provides an outlet for students to safely and creatively express their thoughts, sentiments and feelings. The winning poems offer insight into young people's challenges with bullying, health, self-identity, self-worth, self-harm, loss, domestic and neighborhood crime, world issues involving the environment and war, nearly every type of emotion, and perceptions and artistic interpretations of whatever surrounds and inspires the ink to flow.

With the event taking place during National Poetry Month, Williams hopes a supportive audience will attend or watch the broadcast, noting, "Every student's poem should be celebrated as a trophy."