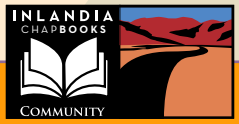
TEEN POET Laureate

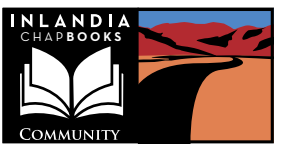


2026-27 FINALISTS

A JOINT PROJECT OF THE RIVERSIDE COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION AND INLANDIA INSTITUTE

TEEN POET LAUREATE FINALIST CHAPBOOK 2026





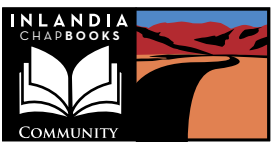
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Teen Poet Laureate Finalist Chapbook

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Contents

Introduction 1

Feed Our Artists
by **Aymarie Daughtery** 2

For We Are Dreamers
by **Atika Anjum** 4

Breathe
by **Charlie Johnson** 6

Don Myrick
by **Kiley Devore** 7

Who is it That You See?
by **Kimiko Kitayama** 8

Compare_Beware!
by **Nassani Gooden** 9

Balloon
by Brandon Ordonez 13

BE JOYFUL, JOY
by Joy Leon 14

Big
by Zack Romo 15

Catholic Struggles
by Bonnie Gonzalez 16

The Coos
by Clarabelle Alvarez 18

Crack
by Johnte Bouldin 20

Cry Baby Cry
by Matthew Munguia 21

Cursed Fame
by Lilith Haag 24

Dream
by Jonah Zurer 25

Drowning Lessons
by Briana Martinez 28

Flowers
by Layla Arciniega 29

Flows
by Allana Beckman 30
The Girl Who Was Almost a Mermaid
by Nicole Phan 31
The Legacy Tree
by Joey Lopez 35
Messages I Can't Send
by Savannah Wishon 36
Mirrors Verdict
by Makayla Castaneda 37
More Than A Daughter
by Genesis Bautista 38
My Story
by Hailynn Robinson 39
The River of Life
by Bridgette Johansen 40
They Tell You They Care
by Vixen Brown 42
Those Voices
by Ixchel Martinez Vazquez 46
To Stand Before You, And During You, And After
by Caitlin Angelique Buensuceso 48
Untitled
by Alena Gutierrez 49
Whitewashed
by Hennessy Parra 50
About the Riverside County
Teen Poet Laureate 53

* 2026-2027 Teen Poet Laureate. Poets of Note appear in bold type.

Introduction

Dear Poets,
This year marks the sixth year of the Teen Poet Laureate partnership between Riverside County Office of Education and Inlandia Institute. We believe in the power of poetry, particularly for youth, and we will always champion you, our teen poets.

As we celebrate the new Teen Poet Laureate for the 2026-2027 school year, we want to honor those who previously held the title:

Haylee Foo (2025-26)
Bethel Albe (2024-25)
Bibinaz Nami (2023-24)
Zoe Leonard (2022-23)
Katie Xin (2021-22)

We offer our sincerest congratulations to **Aymarie Daughtry**, who we are welcoming as the 2026-27 Riverside County Teen Poet Laureate. We could not be more excited to see where this year takes us with Aymarie at the helm.

She is joined by First Runner-Up Atika Anjum and Second Runner-Up Charlie Johnson, and Poets of Note Kiley Devore, Kimiko Kitayama, and Nassani Gooden.

We want each of you to know just how extraordinary your accomplishments are! The talent showcased this year was truly remarkable, making the selection of our finalists—and ultimately our Teen Poet Laureate—an incredibly difficult decision. You all have exquisite talent, and for those of you who are eligible to submit again next year, we cannot wait to see your growth and hear more from you.

In the words of Emily Dickinson:
"This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—
The simple News that Nature told—
With tender Majesty
Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—
Judge tenderly—of Me"

Like Dickinson, you have entrusted your words to the hands and hearts of others, inviting them to see the world through your eyes. Never underestimate the power of your voice or the importance of your story.

Mckenna Deluca-Martinez and Renee Rojanaroj

Feed Our Artists

by Aymarie Daughtery

Rancho Verde High School

"The river forgives nothing; it only pretends to forgive."
Poetic, right?
But I did not write this
Neither did any person
This is a void
Dressed in human mouth
Stringing lies from those of reality.

It pours from the golden chalice
We drink
Gulp down the dry rose wine
Down
Down
Down
Our throats

We don't question why the cup glints an off gold
It hides its true identity
Pyrite.
We don't question why
the grape juice is only a mix
Of false red and white

Down. Down. Down.

We as one chant:
"Feed our artist!"

Yet we make no effort to fill their bellies.
Instead we stick our hands down their throats.
We grip the red of their stomachs and the white of their thoughts
We feed it to our humanoid companion.
Artificial intelligence.

We watch as it swallows
Slow and chilling.
Makes a mixture resembling the silhouette of a human in its stomach

We feed our artists to it and watch.
Slowly
we press
Down down down
onto its stomach until it regurgitates a dry rose piece of art.

We grow the boy yet starve the mother.

For We Are Dreamers

by Atika Anjum

Canyon Springs High School

The stage light has begun blinding my sight, while the words I have sought for simply slip from my mind. I find myself thinking out loud, of the perfect words a teenager with sixteen beats could say to impress a crowd.

But the pen lingers in between the tips of my fingers, losing myself within every stanza, every line. I forget where my vision lies, within the past, present or the near future I hope to make mine.

You see, my identity has been created by the past lives of my ancestors who have brought me to life. My past had been shared, as the lives before me gave rain to the rich brown soil that waited for its chance at life.

But earth's land never taught me to stand, so I find myself re-reading the pages set beforehand.

But the dreamers are gonna dream when they know they are destined for greatness, while society tells all of us dreamers that our words are weightless.

How could I ever be so foolish to think that I could leave an imprint in this world, inspire the thoughts of writers who once felt worthless?

How could I be the spark for every human being in this life to embark on a journey to find themselves when society tells us who we can be?

When the world overlooks all of us dreamers who still believe?

The truth is, you are the limits you set for yourself.

So be the greatest there ever was.

But only for yourself to thrive amongst the unspoken hearts, by being the unique voice there never was.

So I stand, because I know that every single one of my ancestors is lending me their hand.

When I lose myself within the pages of my writing, forget my own story, I look around at the 8.3 billion people from all walks of life who have given their voice fighting for what they believe is right, simply just to be alive.

For now, I am only a sixteen year old girl who is still writing her own story and finding comfort within her own presence, dreaming of being the voice for the future.

But one day when the world will pass me by, my words will become the echo that brings dreamers back to life.

So allow me to continue standing in front of every dreamer here today, as a reminder that we were never meant to find our place in this world.

We were always destined to create it.

For we are the dreamers,

and dreamers were never meant to wait for a future.

We were always destined to build it.

Breathe

by Charlie Johnson

Valley View High School

I breathe in and am hit with the smell of rain.

I feel present for the first time in days.

I look up and see the stars.

I feel so small.

I breathe out and become aware of my lungs.

Aware of the contraction of my muscles, of the blood pumping through me.

I know the warmth of myself.

I feel like a miracle.

I breathe in and look,

Really look.

The plants, the ground, the concrete, the buildings, the trees, the lights, the clouds,

The sky.

I breathe out and I know.

In,

My heart is the size of my fist.

Out,

My heart is the size of the ocean.

In,

I am a grain of sand.

Out,

I am a star.

I breathe in and I am everything.

Don Myrick

by Kiley Devore

Western Center Academy

Gray-haired and clean-shaven,
He sits on his porch every morning
The bitter black coffee steaming
Hot enough to burn the tongue

Polished shoes
Swish against linoleum floors
Every step carrying a soft squeak of old floors

His jokes are terrible,
Yet still, grins bloom
Into bright smiles around the room

The smell of the morning dew
Upon every green blade of grass
Reminds him of the time children came and played,
Laughing with an angelic pitch,
High and free,
Untouched by cruel time.

Southern remarks slip between his words,
A familiar lisp,
A bright, happy twang
That once put children to sleep.

Between sips of his boiling coffee,
Stories of "the war"
Spill from his mouth.

The Photograph
Gray and softened with time,
His uniform on a younger face.
Cracks split the middle,
The corners curl inwards.

Yet he still giggles

Who is it That You See?

by Kimiko Kitayama

Canyon Springs High School

Mother, who do you see when you see my face?
Is it a painted little girl layered with pigmented gouache or rather—
a mirror covered by white mist and paste
with overgrown vines wrapped around it bearing thorns and prickles
that can pierce through skin if brought too close.
Does this reflection know the lineage follows them, Mother?
I often ponder who it is that I see, too.
While I can see my reflection clear as day,
it remains unclear who it is staring back at me.
I press my hand against my face to know I am real,
but still I don't know what it is I am supposed to feel.
Or rather — who it is that you see
when you see my face.

I start to run my hand across my face,
and I recognize traits quite similar to yours.
And I start to learn that maybe
we are not so different. At the old joke boxes
Like he was a child himself
Hiding beneath gray hair.

Compare_Beware!

by Nassani Gooden

Western Center Academy

It was 6:43 AM when my alarm rang for work, demanding me to see the sunshine
"Come on, you know the drill!", it said. "You know you gotta get there on time!"
I tried to ignore it out of sheer spite, but it just continued screeching
So I finally woke up annoyed, with no chance of time impeaching
After showering, brushing teeth, and putting on clothes, I made a jog to my car
But alas, it was in a state where it could not get far!
"Stupid dumb car…", I muttered. "Why did your engine break?"
The universe answered me as I remembered it was out of date.
"Ah, screw it!", I said, and proceeded to sprint
It's moments like this that make me wonder why I didn't quit.
My ankles were burning, running in high heels
And soon, in a few moments, I'd be caught in the feels
I guess God decided to taunt me today, because why did I see
A woman wearing designer and diamond rings
A kid who's known to invent magnificent things
And a man who has a family he clearly clings?!
My emotions got the better of me, and I shouted, "WHY IS MY LIFE THE ONLY ONE THAT SUCKS?!??!?!?!"
Little did I know, I caused a ruckus
Filled with bashes and bumps, and the world crumbling
This is the turning point of the story, dear Listener, so make sure to tune in!
A heavenly figure descended from above
With multiple limbs and eyes galore
It finally went in front of me and started hovering
Its expression had the face of one who wanted to state something from its core
"I AM AN ANGEL WHO OBSERVES PEOPLE'S LIVES AND I WAS DOING THAT UNTIL I HEARD YOUR CRY! THEREFORE, I CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN TO SERVE AND SHOW YOU THERE IS MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE!"

It huffed and wheezed after saying these words
As if it took a lot out of it
"You know, being loud is actually pretty exhausting for angels…", it said without any mirth
"But anywho, hop on my back, why don't you? You'll only be gone for a bit!"
I followed its guidance like an obedient pupil, and we immediately started to fly
Guess now, touching the clouds, I can say I've touched the sky
Miles of sea and land all went by
And eventually, a grand mansion is where we arrived
"This is the home of the woman with fancy clothes and nice diamond rings.
She has it all now, but you don't know what it meant for her to bring!
Just a few years ago, she was struggling with debt
And those loansharks she worked with wouldn't quit until their needs were met!
Even after dealing with them, her financial troubles weren't over
As her poor spending habits made her broker and broker!
Eventually, she hired a financial counselor who taught her how to save
And ever since then, she has never had to slave."
I looked in shock, floating in the air over the house
Never thought a woman like her played cat and mouse!
I began to feel bad for her poor circumstances
Even though the woman had been advancing
"Dang, that sucks…", I said glumly
But the angel seemed delighted, funnily!
"You are a human, I expect nothing less.
I'd honestly be surprised if you assumed the woman was not blessed!"
"I guess you're right," accepting my fate
"I know I am; I've lived countless dates!
Now continue gripping on my back as this journey isn't over
As we are about to cross over the border."
After what felt like eternity, seeing nothing but dry land
We finally reached a place featuring nothing but sand
And shrubs and cacti and dunes, it was all just bare
And the cherry on top? A humble little dwelling with some wear and tear
"'Why did we travel for such a distance?', you're probably wondering.
Well, the person's life we're discussing is such a blundering!

If it's not obvious somehow, the child inventor that you saw doesn't live here
But has actually traveled to your country for a competition for money, and he certainly veered!
Born poor, he always wondered how he could make money since he was little
And was always bullied by his peers for making complex gizmos
His parents were ambitious, however, and wanted to nourish their son's talent
So they traveled to your land for a chance to live lavish!"
"The more you know…", I replied instinctively
I started to question my mental identity
I was so sure that these people lived good since birth; fully, absolutely, and positively
But I just keep getting proven wrongly!
Sorry for my childish rhyme, but I wonder what our third observee shall entail
Did he fraud mail and was he bailed out of jail?!
I thought long and hard about this, as I thought it'd be nice to be right before the angel
But I guess and fear time will only tell…
After two hours, or I don't know! I'm losing all sense of time
We reached a place filled with cold and ice
The frost bit me; I seriously wished I had a blanket
And somehow, beneath all the snow, I could see a nice one-story house; there was no faking it
"In this comfy little abode where the family man calls home
There's certainly a lot of warmth, yes.
But before that, there was turbulence and storms
That nearly destroyed the dome
A few years ago, he and his wife were in the midst of divorce
Plus a bunch of worry about child support
But thank God, it all worked out
And this family is now in no need of doubt!"
The trifecta of triumph I have now finished witnessing
They may be thriving, but that doesn't mean they're averse to misery!
Once fighting to survive, and now surviving for living
It just goes to show after being taken from, you'll receive giving!
But deep down, in the depths of my mind and heart
There was one feeling I could not depart
"Why do I still desire these material things like a prize

Even though you've shown me what it is they hide?"
The angel thought long and hard for a moment
Pondered as if it never encountered this question before
"Well, the thing is, no matter what you have
You'll always want some more!
Desire is one of the core concepts of a human that makes them strive;
Without it, would they even be alive?
The important thing is not to let it consume you;
Take the jealousy, the bitterness, as something to work through!
You want to be more fit? Eat more healthily and workout!
You want to make new friends? Out there, you should put yourself about!
Don't overwork yourself, of course; you're not a machine!
But if you really think about it, envy is just a competitive dream."
My jaw dropped, but how could I not expect something so profound from a cosmic entity?
They literally may have just improved my emotional longevity
I'm not even kidding; I feel this joy in my head!
And also a desire to return to my homeland…
"Could you take me back to where you met me?", I asked meekly.
"Of course, my friend!", it said gently beaming
After a long while, I returned to that block
The angel said "Farewell, my child!" as it dropped me off
All I did after was stare at the floor and think
Besides, I'm like 4 hours late, so no more will I shrink!
I made a mental note to myself, and you should probably take it
If someone has something you want, go out and aim for it!

Balloon

by Brandon Ordonez

Valley View High School

Imagine carrying a balloon at all times. It would always be with you no matter what. A balloon is such a simple thing, full of color and full of life in the air, and brings joy and wonder to those watching. All balloons are filled with some sort of fuel. Some people fill them with their joy, peace, and love. They carry it wherever they go, reminding them of all the good things in the world. These are the balloons filled with life. But some people fill their balloons with worries, stress, anxiety, depression, and all types of heavy burdens. It's always with them, reminding them of their problems; these are the balloons filled with death. All that weight that they carry is like an anchor holding onto its ship, or the thought of being trapped and having no way out, no way out of their problems. For the balloons filled with life, they are seen dancing with the winds above. Rising above all storms. Their light shines so bright they become lanterns of the sky, free from the friction of the earth. For balloons filled with death, it feels as if you're slowly sinking, losing your breath. You feel like you're dipping lower to the ground as time goes on. You look at your balloon and are reminded of all those problems, and it's as if the world is breaking you, slowly shaping you into someone you wouldn't want to love. Someone you don't recognise anymore. It's hard to let go of all these things, and it may seem impossible, but amidst all the problems, there is a way out; we just have to enter the maze and find our way out, and you will see the progress and, with time, your balloon will start to be fueled with life, and all heavy burdens that you used to carry are no longer there. All those problems are now anchored on that heavy grass below while you carry your balloon of life, which reminds you of when you were a child, so pure and full of innocence. You finally exhale a breath you've held for years, and now you're free.

BE JOYFUL, JOY

by Joy Leon

Mission Vista Academy

"Be courageous," they say—
But what is courage?

"Be strong."
The voice echoes in my mind.
But why is it so hard to stay standing?
"Keep it together,"
I whisper to myself, alone.
But why is it so much harder
When everyone else is gone?

"Be your name,"
I repeat to myself.
But how?

Tell me what that looks like.
How can I stay strong?
How can I stay courageous?
How can I keep it together?
How can I stop questioning?

When did myself
And this idea
Become a part of my identity?

Is who I am just a feeling?
Is being joyful only fleeting?
Is that all I'm allowed to be?
Is that how I match your expectations of me?

How can I
Be my name?

Big

by Zack Romo

Valley View High School

They call me "big" when I eat food.
Was I expected to have nothing at all?
It seems today it isn't enough to be thin but to be small,
They make me feel small.
Like I'm worthless.
It seems the greater the number means I'm worth less,
And I know I'm thin,
But it's never enough, you can never win
In a world of implanted insecurities,
Pretty isn't pretty.
And small isn't small.
But I'm sick of feeling two feet tall.
So maybe I'll let myself get full.
Someday not care what's "big" in society or at school.
And though I'm not yet fine,
Every day, I'm trying.

Catholic Struggles

by Bonnie Gonzalez

Western Center Academy

I'm from a Catholic household,
from going to church every Sunday,
from praying every night,
from kneeling beside my bed, asking God to help me.
I'm from strict parents
with strong beliefs,
from being taught what was right and what's wrong,
from being told there were things
I shouldn't become.
I'm from trying to be the perfect child,
from listening to every lesson,
from believing that if I prayed enough, I would never feel lost,
but I did.
I'm from sitting in church,
hearing words about faith
while wondering
if someone like me was normal.
I'm from looking up at the cross
and asking myself
why being honest about who I was
made me feel disgusting.
I'm from praying for answers,
from asking God to make me understand,
from wondering if He could still love me
even if I didn't.
I'm from growing up without knowing the outside world,
to discovering what was hidden.
I'm from lying to my parents and hiding,
trying to fit into the standards they had set.
I'm from thinking I wasn't normal,
from thinking there was something wrong,

to finding myself
with Benson and Byron by my side.
I started becoming who I truly was.
I'm from going to school trying to fit in,
from trying to walk correctly,
from being anxious,
from wondering what everyone was thinking,
until I couldn't think straight,
until I met her.
With her,
my mind became calm.
I felt safe.
I felt understood.
I felt true.
And for the first time,
I didn't have to hide.

The Coos

by Clarabelle Alvarez

Great Oak High School

The vines spiral along my leg
I'm afraid i might break
The pressures take me in
As i submerge into the ground
Dirt all around
Soaking my eyes in a muddy blindfold
The scent of pine trees flood my senses
The last thing I hear is a coo
Of a delicate dove
Nature shows me herself
With the coos echoing in my mind
I awaken to a new world
Where the dove hangs above the powerline
Its wings spread slicing the silver-lined sky
Not a hint of blue in sight
The smell of pine has withered away
Replaced with a sharp scent
One that amplifies each time the engine revs
Putrid
Drowning out the coos
The ground has been replaced with concrete now wrapped
around my feet
No tree in sight, the alpines have left me alone in a city of concrete
Blessing me with fake grass and a burning sensation
Something modern floods my brain
The parking lot seems to turns into waves as the sun emerges
It beats on me, burning my flesh like a fire
I recognize this one
The sun, same one from the forest
I remember when it used to nurture my skin,
now it must be punishing me
Maybe because being human is punishment in itself
Maybe those waves get closer because i'm human

Maybe the sun beats harder because human
Maybe my skin is on fire because of human
Maybe I lay on the floor because of humans
Coos, I remember, coos, coos.
I wish I died hearing the coos
I wish I died smelling alpine forests
I wish I died soaking in a muddy blindfold
I wish I died submerged in the ground
Feeling something, something I can name.
Hearing something I can name
Smelling something I can name.
Seeing something I can name.
I wish I could hear the coos.
Like a chorus in a serene, lush land
Maybe, the dove liked it better, gripping a branch
Instead of clutching its claws on the only possible thing available
Not having to rest on a burning, black, line of volts.
Maybe It would coo louder.
Maybe I could die hearing the coos
Coo, coo, coos.

Crack

by Johnte Bouldin

Valley View High School

Ever since I was young, I felt as if I had an identity crisis.
How people saw me with their eyes…is not how I felt I actually am.
"Johnte. You're the whitest black person I've ever met."
Why do you say that? The fact that I don't give into stereotypes and smoke and drink and do stuff stupid, yet?
The fact I shortened my name to make it digestible for subs, the fact I don't have anything to love?
Maybe I hated running laps, or maybe cause I made a part of me that I'm black but I can't make any good raps?

Well, now I have a story to tell you.

In 2009, an uncle decided to… do a line.
He got into a car crash before he ever got to see my face — crack has always been a destroyer of the African American race. From Black Panthers to Bluds and Crips, this too is why no one can take a trip to Los Angeles without fearing their lives.
Rather if it's Ronald Reagan's fault that he administered it to us, or the fact we continue that cycle of violence, people causing separation for their peace, innocents asking for the internal war to Cease,
I have a rap for you.

Cry Baby Cry

by Matthew Munguia

Canyon Springs High School

Ten years old today,
Ten years old today,
Everybody's smiling,
But he looks away.

Candles burning brightly,
Cake is twice as tall,
Everybody's singing,
He can't hear them all.

Cry, Baby, Cry
Cry, Baby, Cry
Everybody came here
So why do you cry?

Friends are laughing loudly,
Running through the room,
Someone calls his name out,
But he stays in gloom.

Presents wrapped in ribbons,
Balloons against the sky,
He gives a little smile,
Then he starts to cry.

Cry, Baby, Cry,
Cry, Baby, Cry,
Birthday boy is hiding
Nobody knows why.

Down the hall he wanders,
Past the birthday cheer,
Closes up the bathroom,
Now the world disappears.

He looks into the mirror,
Wearing his paper crown.
"What's wrong with you?"
He whispers.
"What's wrong with you?"
He starts to shout.
"YOU SHOULD BE HAPPY!"
The music keeps playing.
"YOU HAVE YOUR FRIENDS!"
The laughter keeps on ringing.
"SO WHY CAN'T YOU BE HAPPY?"
Silence.
Then
CRACK.
The mirror breaks its reflection,
Pieces catching the light.

His little hands are shaking,
And his smile is gone from sight.

He looks at all the fragments,
At every broken face.

One reflection starts to smile.
Another looks afraid.

Cry, Baby, Cry,
Cry, Baby, Cry,
Ten little years old,
With tears in his eyes.

Cry, Baby, Cry,
Don't ask yourself why.

The party keeps on singing.
The birthday passes by.

And underneath the music,
Behind the bathroom door,

A little voice keeps whispering
"Maybe I don't matter."
Then quieter still
"Maybe nobody noticed."
And somewhere down the hallway,
The candles slowly die.

Cry, Baby, Cry.
Cry, Baby, Cry.

Happy birthday, little one.
Now tell us

Why?

Cursed Fame

by Lilith Haag

Valley View High School

The spotlight caught them in its heavy glare,
They used to walk the margins, wild and free,
Defined by nothing but their sovereignty.

The cameras came to carve them into stone,
And turned their shifting pronouns into a brand,
A slogan tailored for a crowded land.

They starved the person just to feed the star,
And forgot who they were, and who they are.
A lonely icon trapped upon the stage,
They traded freedom for a gilded cage.

Dream

by Jonah Zurer

John W. North High School

I walked. Walked, walked. To escape the harsh sun out there. Into the classroom where the cutting white lights illuminated the whiteboard walls filled with writing. The shiny grey faucets, drip drop drip drop, unrelenting, drip drop drip drop. The beige-grey desks awaited me. The teacher stood, a face of filled paper, her mouth making sounds to the mass of students funneling into the room. As if I was trying to rip myself from some unknown dream, to open my eyes and escape, I began to move. My feet took turns putting themselves out in front of me. I slowly fell, and they tiredly caught me, planting on the ground beneath me, over and over again, until I reached my desk. I fell back into place, unconsciously awake, before the bell rang. "Take out your Chromebooks," exclaimed Ms. Hiraoka as she swung the door almost shut. She left a sunbeam peeking through the crack, prodding me. "We're doing a survey today, to see what you might want to do with the rest of your life."

My fingers typed in the survey link. The link was clicked, the computer whirred, and the first question popped up.

"Which activity would you enjoy the most: Building something, a group activity, or taking care of people?"

What should I answer? Sure, I like building things, but group activities are fun too. Taking care of people? All of them are completely different.

"Ms. Hiraoka," I asked after thinking thoughtlessly, "How am I supposed to know what I want to do for the rest of my life? I barely started high school a few weeks ago." She responded, "You don't. The survey will tell you what you might enjoy."

I took a second, slightly confused. The survey seemed a little too straightforward. I clicked "building", and with that choice it was as if the sunbeam had rushed in through the door, stopped haphazardly in front of me, and snatched my mind right out of my own hands. After a hundred questions, a box appeared on the screen, "Click here to reveal your dream job!"

I did as it said, like I always did. Architecture, archeology, things I had already wanted to do or had thought about doing in the past. As soon as the sun had taken my mind from me, the sun had placed my brain back into my skull, not only grey, but the color of an orange.

I walk down a cement trail, eroded by sneakers and tires, moving my feet to propel me forward. The harsh sun that had beaten down on the world during the day softens a bit. I look forward up the long path that lies pre-planned in front of my feet. To each side, dried up bushes and beige granite rocks plead for contact. The world threatens to throw the sun out of the sky, to leave a beautiful red spatter before it fades to nothing. For now, the sky is simply blue. "Kyle!" I call to a childhood friend after spotting a steep, but more direct rock pathway that veers off the trail up the mountain, "Shortcut!"

Kyle and I smile as we both immediately cut toward the bottom of the rock path eroded by nothing but time. I step off the trail and the ground changes beneath me. It feels new, rejuvenating. We walk further and further from the ground beneath our feet, as the sun is pulled down in slow motion through the dull blue sky. We walk in unison, up the serene mountain with sandy rocks strewn about, eyes locked downwards to make sure we don't fall. "I think it's this way next," I nearly ask, but merely say to Kyle.

He responds, "I think that way is better," because both paths go up the mountain.

We continue upwards, each on our own path, not realizing that about 20 feet ahead, the paths converge anyway. At some point we cross the original cement trail that we avoided at the start. We take a second to catch our breath, observe the people passing by. Straight ahead, towering rocks line the edge of a small plateau, like curtains drawn across a stage. "Straight or to the right?" I ask.

He responds, "You choose," knowing my answer.

We journey straight ahead, shimmying up the cool rocks with scratchy surfaces, blissfully aware of each other and the environment around us. As we climb, nervous anticipation fills us as we prepare for the curtains to reveal some performance.

At last, we arrive at a clearing after scaling a rock which stands like a locked door. On the ground far below, a fresh haze rises from the sandy earth, so unbelievably dream-like that its reality is inscrutable. My eyes move up toward the horizon after Kyle and I consciously suck in every detail from the valley below. Brimming with adrenaline, my eyes find the trickle in the greenish riverbed. It winds away to some far off place. To my left, city lights dance about, bright and alive. Finally, my eyes find the sun, shining with ravenous light and spilling its fiery paint upon the horizon. Our world illuminates for a moment, then as soon as the sunset starts, the harsh sun isn't so harsh anymore. We stare in shared awe at the spectacle which lies in the sky before us, purely alive. As soon as the ebb and flow had begun, that moment that bordered numb and sensitive was over, and the world fell away from the harsh sun out there.

Drowning Lessons

by Briana Martinez

Valley View High School

Life feels like a drowning lesson.
The emotions I feel every day drown me, like a dark and terrible secret
that's holding me behind
Keeping me feeling small.
I'm okay I promise, I lied
As I choke on the words that I draw between the lines.
Sometimes I wish someone would pull the plug on the static that
screams in my head.
As I lay still like a corpse in a coffin that I call my bed.
It feels like everyone around me is just a ghost.
A ghost of someone or something that understands how I feel.
I wish someone would understand how I feel,
without having to let them see the hardest part of what's living in me.
So just fix your eyes on the brick and stone,
And leave me to rot here in my death throne.
Unholy and quiet, not making a sound,
Burying the truth six feet underground.
The lessons taught now just a sound,
An echo of what used to be a life lesson,
swallowing me whole, suffocating me.
Now was just a drowning lesson.

Flowers

by Layla Arciniega

Valley View High School

Flowers bloomed from each jagged crack,
The memory of them always beckoning me back.
Each petal was painted with a beautiful hue,
Light red and mixed with crimson too.

I'd pick one with my fingers,
The scent and sight still linger.
The sticky nectar stains my hands,
The nectar I once thought I couldn't stand.

I put the substance to my tongue,
To this day the taste has clung.
It's nothing I could ever describe,
Something that I felt I should hide.

This was meant only for me,
Not for anyone else to see.
Unfortunately, on one fateful day,
Someone found my flowers and took them away.

To keep them, I fought tooth and nail,
But in the end, they would always prevail.
Now I only sit and feel sour,
Thinking of how I miss my flowers.

Flows

by Allana Beckman

Valley View High School

Water flows constantly with no end in sight.
It flows down the river bank, like a trail in the night.
It flows in between the fish, wrapping them in a home.
It flows through my fingers and leaks from my hold.
It flows down my cheek, when I find no end.
It flows like the words that are trapped in my head.
It flows too fast for even an eagle to see.
And it flows just too far out of my reach.

The Girl Who Was Almost a Mermaid

by Nicole Phan

Palm Desert High School

CHAPTER 1: A Girl Born in the Wrong Kingdom
Once upon a time, in a kingdom of desert
where the sky rains 3 months of the year
and the mountains a shade of crumbled bronze like the edges of old bread
A Girl was born
In the water, she went quiet as a held note
Lifted out, she wept as if she was torn from her shell.
For she was the happiest in the water: chasing the sprinklers,
kneeling at puddles, splashing in the kitchen sink
All while her mother foretold, "She'll grow out of it."
She did not

CHAPTER 4: Where She Corrects the Storyteller
Of course she hearkened The Little Mermaid every. Single. Night.
The sea witch in her cove of stolen treasures,
the voice that was pulled out of the princess
and the legs that bloomed and burned with every passing step.
But every night the Girl raised her small hand and said
No, again. This time do it right.
Because in her version the mermaid said please and I like your hair
and when the legs came for free, she kept her voice, she kept the sea
and the witch even got a hug, for which she was in dire need
Her mother responded that was not how bargains worked.
The Girl said no one ever tried to ask the witch nicely.

CHAPTER 6: A Rival Arrives
A little brother. Red hair, a little loud, and a whole lot of useless.
She found nothing in him worth keeping

until his first bath,
when he kicked both his feet and laughed at the splashes,
and she gasped, and turned to her whole small court, and proclaimed:
He's one of us.
She named him Flounder
Not that it matched the name on paper, but she felt it was the truer one

CHAPTER 9: Queen of the Pool
That summer she lived beneath the surface
Her hair becoming green at the ends. Her crown, she called it
She could hold her breath for 47 seconds.
Flounder kept the count from the land,
Trapped in a tower** that only went up to twenty
So he counted to twenty and began again,
And the Girl burst up gasping, how long?
And he said, with a king's certainty, twenty
She taught him how to float: one hand flat on the small of his back
And recited the only spell she knew, said low, said steady:
I've got you. I've got you. I've got you
Spoken three times with so much trust that even the fates
watched in awe
That was how the spell worked.

CHAPTER 10: A Promise was Made
Next summer, she told him, she would teach him how to dive.
But old stories are strict about promises.
Even, perhaps, grimace at the thought of them.
They keep them in the darkest corners of their mind, waiting for
another victim to make them.
She was 10.

CHAPTER 11: ...

CHAPTER 12: No One Says the Word
There is no Chapter 11.
She checked. The book goes from 10 to 12
The same way the house goes on standing around a room
no one opens anymore,
and everyone learns the long route to the kitchen
What Chapter 11 should've been about:
A backyard. A gate. A lock that never learned its job
Four minutes, which the Girl knows for certain
because so many people have told her
It's not your fault
that she wants to ask, then whose?
And no one in the kingdom dares to offer a name.
His shoes still wait next to the door, just like he left them
No one will move them. No one can touch them

CHAPTER 13: The Curse is Explained
In the fairy tale, the mermaid trades her tail for legs,
and the sea witch warns her: every step on land will feel like
walking on knives.
The Girl walks on land just fine.
It's the water that has the knives now.
Chlorine surrounds her and threatens her lungs.
The sound of a bathtub in the room sends white-hot aching pain into
the marrow of her feet
When the sky rains 3 months a year, she stands still.
Waiting for it to finish
So the witch did take the voice, after all.
The Girl who once bargained with fairy tales
Now answers in the fewest words.
So soft, so quiet that it would make the strongest hearts look away.

CHAPTER 15: No Prince will Come
Tenth grade. Swim class.
Sitting on the highest bleacher, with her knees caressing her forehead,
while below her thirty kids giggle and shriek
in the aquatic kingdom she was exiled from.
No prince comes. Not that kind of story.
A girl from third period climbs the bleachers instead,
sits one step down, smiles, and says nothing.
But it is the first thing anyone has said to her in years.

CHAPTER 17: Journey Back to the Kingdom
Evening. The pool uncharacteristically still.
The mountains a shade of crumbled bronze
The same shallow end where a girl once lived beneath the surface
with green-tipped hair like a crown,
but now sits at its lip, staring.
And staring.
The water looking up at her like a question or maybe a threat.
The girl who cried to be put back in the bath now puts her feet in.
It hurts. The witch was right about the knives,
so she counts to twenty
and begins again. And counts to twenty.
She feels the cold, sharp water holding her ankles
the same way a hand once lay flat on the small of a back
and she hears the only spell she ever knew,

said low, said steady:
I've got you. I've got you. I've got you.
There is no Chapter 18 yet.
The book does not say happily ever after.
It says: and she lived
and leaves the rest of the page white as sea foam
Just for her.

The Legacy Tree

by Joey Lopez

Valley View High School

Legacy, what is a legacy?

It's caring for a tree that you will never see

For when this bud becomes a tree

It'll remember the one who planted it

Because plants grow from memory

It remembers those it fed when they were hungry,

Those who gave it water when it was thirsty,

Those who stab its bark

Just to preserve their names in history

And though you're just a footnote in its long life

You will do the best you can to make this tree thrive

And the tree will remember and be grateful for all eternity

Messages I Can't Send

by Savannah Wishon

Valley View High School

I hate the way you stare at me,

How your eyes interlock with mine from afar.

I hate the way you part your hair,

How it's always failing to pick a side.

I hate how you dress,

That little "biker style".

I hate the way I never got to know you,

Although it's all I wanted to do.

I hate the way you hated calls,

But made an exception for me.

I hate the way you rewrote your rules,

Just so you could love me.

I hate how I'm writing poetry directed to you,

Knowing I can't do it as meaningfully as you once did for me.

I hate the way you're always listening to Kanye,

Though now, he's just Ye.

But most importantly,

I hate the way I never hated you,

Never have,

And I never will.

Mirrors Verdict

by Makayla Castaneda

Western Center Academy

In the Mirror she looks, a judgmental gaze,
a furrowed brow, a lingering stare.
That same gaze now given back.
Before ever giving the day a chance,
she always gathered courage to present herself,
Before the Mirror.
Before the Jury.
Before the Judge.
Eye bags, the first feature to be noticed, followed by squinted eyes
caught by the flash of light bouncing off her braces.
The next few hours spent getting ready.
A steaming shower scrubbing her skin to a luckless ladybug red,
A face of makeup used as warpaint,
A foggy cloud lingering,
distorting her image from the pounds of floral-sprayed perfume.
A single piece of hair out of place,
An unplucked eyebrow,
inviting stares like a voice crack.
In her eyes, every imperfection
seemed to be the end of the world.
Never looking in the Mirror
for longer than a few minutes
Fearing that if she looked any longer
at the so-called "medusa" she'd turn to stone.
Before leaving for school
she takes one more glance in the Mirror
But this time, differently
She waits for a validating smile,
that will never come,
For the Mirror can only give back
what she gives herself.

More Than A Daughter

by Genesis Bautista

Valley View High School

I am a daughter.
My mother's daughter.
But I'm more than that.
I am an actor, a friend, a singer, Oh your mothers must be proud.
This isn't about her.
This is about me.
About MY life.
My story.
I am more than an extension of my parents.
Daughter feels like a chain surrounding who I really am.
They made me, they say.
But they didn't make who I am.
They didn't shape my personality.
Yes they gave me a name but who would I be if they gave me everything else?
A clone?
A doll?
A puppet?
I am not my parents and they are not me.
I am me, myself, and I.

My Story

by Hailynn Robinson

Western Center Academy

A shadow follows closely where I go,
The black figure lurking around,
Whispering things that make my courage small,
Body-shaming, name-calling, and unneeded opinions.
It hides beneath the smile I always show,
While heavy silence echoes through the hall.
The walls around me feel like closing doors,
Each cruel word falls sharply like the rain,
"Fat"... "stupid"... "You never do anything right."
My heart grows tired from always keeping scores,
And every bright day somehow feels like pain.
Depression settles like a winter sky,
It covers every color that I see,
Muting the dark blue, to a soft overcast grey,
And a dark red, to soft pink.
I watch the hours slowly passing by,
And wonder when my mind will let me be.
But beneath the cracks, a small light stays,
A little spark that darkness cannot claim,
It grows a little stronger through the days,
Confidence gained over time,
It reminds me I am more than someone's blame.
The shadow may have followed me for years,
But now I learn that I deserve the sun,
I slowly let myself release my fears,
And find the strength to know that I am not done.
I am not what those cruel voices say,
My story still has chapters left to write,
And even when the darkness fills the day,
I know that I can still reach for the light.

The River of Life

by Bridgette Johansen

Western Center Academy

The river of life flows ever onward
Never knowing what may be round the near bend
A young stream flowing through untouched lands
It waits to be discovered
It joins its peers into canyons
The pace quickens through rapids
Seeking the next bend
The next adventure
A new beginning

The river of life flows ever onward
Crashing deep beneath the Earth
Darkness with an unknown end
A confusing time of trial
The water remembering the moments of light
It moves quickly for freedom
Seeking the next bend
The next adventure
A new beginning

The river of life flows ever onward
Running through the forest and valley
Reaches some clearing
And sees all surrounding
A clarity it never knew before
It continues forward
Seeking the next bend
The next adventure
A new beginning

The river of life flows ever onward
It takes a quiet pace
Sliding into the tranquil lake
Here it stays for the rest of its time

Remembering the journey
Only this time
There is no bend ahead
The adventure comes to an end
This is the last new beginning.

They Tell You They Care

by Vixen Brown

Valley View High School

They tell you they care to make you feel better.
It's such a beautiful sentence.

Short enough to fit inside a comment section,
Sweet enough to print on a poster,
Simple enough to repeat without ever having to prove it.

We care.
Your life matters.
You are not alone.

And somewhere,
in a room full of people repeating those words,
is someone succumbing to the numbness
and disappearing right in front of your eyes.

They'll laugh when the joke is expected,
because if they don't, the people will see what is wrong.
They'll answer "I'm fine,"
because being fine is the gateway to being unsuspecting,
the passcode to enter a conversation without
becoming an inconvenience.

They learn exactly how quiet a person can become
before anyone notices.

Apparently,
you can get so quiet, not even the streetlamps that flicker when you
take your night walks will notice.

Apparently,
a person can be in the middle of a crowded room and still be invisible.

And it's not like they don't want to be heard,
they do.

They are afraid.
Afraid of being judged and laughed at for their melancholy,
afraid of burdening others with the weight of their issues.

And isn't that a strange fear?

Because everyone says,
"If you ever need anything, I'm here."
But "here," it is not constant.

"Here" the conversation becomes uncomfortable.
"Here" until caring requires more than typing a heart beneath a post.
"Here" until the sadness lingers for too long.

And that shouldn't be.

But don't worry.
They'll come back.
Oh, they always come back.
And come back too late, they do.

And that's the part that angers me,
turns my sorrow bitter.

Because how dare a world teach people to beg for help
and then punish them for not asking correctly?

How dare they say,
"Talk to someone!"
and then sigh when someone actually speaks?

How dare they say,
"We would miss you!"
when they couldn't find time to notice you were missing already?

How dare they turn grief
into proof of their love?

How dare they save the kind words
for the ceremonies that could have been avoided.

Everyone now remembers the person's name.
Everyone has a story to tell.
And everyone wishes they had known.

But…
they didn't know.

Maybe not everything.
Not every thought,
or fear,
or silent moment.

But they knew enough to ask.
And they didn't.
Not because they were monsters.
That would almost be easier.

No.
They were ordinary people.
Busy people.
Tired people.
People who probably did care.

Just not loudly enough when it mattered.
The terrifying thought: that love can exist and still fail someone.
That a room can be full…and still feel empty?

That a person can be surrounded by voices saying,
"We care, we care, we care."
while quietly wondering
why caring feels so much like being alone?

If you took the time to just look at people.
Really look.

Notice when someone's truth feels fake.
Maybe push a little now instead of sulking about
what you could've done then.

Sometimes, they need proof that they're still visible,
that they're worth the time and effort.

Maybe that is what makes everything about this
so unbearably sad.

Not that there are people who never cared.
But there are people who do
and never realize
how much louder they should have said it.

Those Voices

by Ixchel Martinez Vazquez

Desert Hot Springs High School

There are many voices inside of me

They are strangers, sharing neither my looks or personality

So how could it be

That they bring more familiarity than my own reflection?

I ask them for answers, a reason for my never-ending confusion

I never get a clear response

Like walking through a crowded street

I could faintly hear their voices

Crashing together into a cacophony of sound

Constantly relying on them, I seek their answers

Do they need me as much as I need them?

I never get a clear response

There are times I feel a sense of clarity

When I lay alone in my room,

the strangers lingering near my miserable form

When I've been hurt yet again by my own shortcomings

Their words, mixed and not entirely coherent, soothe my battered soul

Why do you stay, even when I've done so little to earn your presence?

I never get a clear response

Why is it me, and not them, who get to experience being in this world?

Compared to them, I am nothing at all

My voice doesn't leave this form

I make no good on my promises to share theirs

So what's the point of listening?

Their voices have finally ceased.

Yet my mind becomes desolate, rotten without them

For I have lost my guides in this world

Does this mean I've truly lost myself?

Without them, am I just a living husk?

For the first time, their words make sense to me

"Never"

I seek out my strangers, not so strange anymore

Their faces bring in me feelings of confusion, yet comfort

While they are different from me, I can't be without them

I now know that I am many people, all put into one functioning body

Still, I seek their answers. Is this what it means to be human?

I never get a clear response

To Stand Before You, And During You, And After

by Caitlin Angelique Buensuceso

Centennial High School

I dressed plainly for the occasion.

The stands would have been full. Yes, the seats would have felt warmth, if only for a little. And I stand a step above the stands in my plain clothes.

Above the stands, it is so bright—the light, it blisters and it stains. It is a dousing white light which drenches my skin in a shade of "morena" deeper than what you left me to inherit.

Inherently, I was made to be you.

Inherently, I am the first to be you.

In the stands, someone clears his throat. A toddler runs down the aisle and someone rushes to pick him up.

There is a silent wailing and a louder weeping for your loss. We say we are celebrating you.

None of us feel the wiser.

Above the stands, I stand in line to say my piece about your life. "She will be at peace now," while I am to inherit the pieces of mourning the phantom crowd releases. I keep my distance from that thought.

Inherently, I keep my distance from you. Who am I to say a word without having remembered a word you had said to me?

Now, I stand here in my favorite white dress wearing my hair up like you've told me to:

Up, like you always do,

Chin up, in your stances,

Wisening up in my stanzas,

As I emulate your legacy in a world you will never get to see.

The seats are full now, and in a year's time, it will be the same.

The chimes call three and seven and six and eleven and they all are the same.

Will I be the same as you? Must I bear the same name as you?

Will another little girl recount the bearings and be up on these stands wearing the same blame I do?

Will she love me, too?

Untitled

by Alena Gutierrez

Valley View High School

There are those who wake up and those that wish they wouldn't
You wake up for school
I wake up for the man
You walk the street alone with your dog
I walk the streets with a man
You lay in your wealth
I lay on your trash
You marry whomever you want
I marry a man
You wear what you want
I wear blue fabric
You get paid from work
I get no money
You sleep on your luxurious bed
I sleep on the floor
You paint your face with colors
I paint away my bruise
You soak up the sunshine
I soak up my blues
You wish upon stars
I wish for a better life
You win every fight
I lose
You fly with the wind
I had my wings clipped
You speak your truth
I speak my silence
You cry from laughter in your stomach
I cry from the emptiness of mine
You have freedom
I have none
You wake up with rights
I wake up with none

Whitewashed

by Hennessy Parra

Valley View High School

You call me "whitewashed",
I'm not accepted as a Latina,
I'm accepted as a "White girl".
So what if I'm "white passing"?
I am not defined by my fair skin.
My heritage and my culture come from my mother and father,
And their mothers and fathers,
And their mothers' mothers and fathers' fathers,
Going back as far as I know for generations.
My great-grandmother and great-grandfather
crossed the border from Mexico to start a new life,
so what gives you the right to say I'm not Mexican,
When they have passed their life on for generations.
I got to celebrate my long-awaited quinceañera,
My great-grandmother made tamales every Sunday,
We call everyone "Tío" and "Tía" or our cousins,
Regardless of the actual relationship because our beautiful family is so big.
So what if I'm "No sabo",
Or don't like to eat Chorizo?
So what if I like hot dogs,
And listen to songs in English?
I've grown up in America all my life,
So you can say "white-washed" with a sour face,
As it is something to be ashamed of,
But I am proud of my heritage and my culture,
And if that's what it means to be "white-washed",
Then I guess I'm whitewashed.

About the Riverside County Teen Poet Laureate

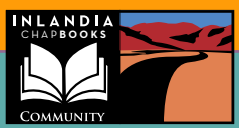
The Riverside County Teen Poet Laureate program is a partnership between Executive Director Mckenna Deluca-Martinez of Inlandia Institute and Arts Administrator Renee Rojanaroj of the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE). Inspired by Amanda Gorman and her powerful poetry reading at the 2021 presidential inauguration, the program was developed to provide a similar opportunity to celebrate and elevate the voices of young poets locally. Now in its sixth year, the Riverside County Teen Poet Laureate program continues to recognize the extraordinary creativity and talent of young writers throughout Riverside County. This program is made possible through the generous funding and support of the Riverside County Office of Education, and we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the many individuals and organizations who help bring it to life.

A special thank you to Riverside County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Edwin Gomez, whose commitment to creating opportunities for students and celebrating their unique talents reflects the very heart of this program. His continued support of arts education and opportunities for student expression helps ensure that young voices are not only heard, but valued and celebrated.

We are grateful to the RCOE Creative Services team for designing the beautiful artwork featured on our promotional materials, invitations, certificates, and chapbook cover, as well as preparing this publication for print. Our sincere thanks to Margery Haupt, Deputy Director of Arts & Cultural Affairs, for arranging the use of Riverside City Hall's Grier Pavilion, providing the floral arrangements, and commissioning the stunning original broadside featuring the winning poet's poem. Thank you to the Riverside County Library System for helping share the voices of our young poets by placing copies of this chapbook in libraries throughout the county. We also extend our appreciation to our dedicated panel of judges—Christine Chen, Dennis Callaci, James Coats, Lisa Pettegrew, and Madeleine Simmons—who generously volunteered their time to thoughtfully read, review, and score the poetry submissions and help select this year's finalists.

And finally, to every teen poet who submitted their work this year: thank you. Your courage, creativity, and willingness to share your words with the world are what make this program so special. Whether or not your poetry was selected for this year's chapbook, your voice matters, and your story deserves to be told. Keep writing, keep growing, and keep sharing your words. We hope to hear from you again next year!

Alena Gutierrez	Valley View High School
Allana Beckman	Valley View High School
Atika Anjum	Canyon Springs High School
*Aymarie Daughtery	Rancho Verde High School
Bonnie Gonzalez	Western Center Academy
Brandon Ordonez	Valley View High School
Briana Martinez	Valley View High School
Bridgette Johansen	Western Center Academy
Caitlin Angelique Buensuceso	Centennial High School
Charlie Johnson	Valley View High School
Clarabelle Alvarez	Great Oak High School
Genesis Bautista	Valley View High School
Hailynn Robinson	Western Center Academy
Hennessy Parra	Valley View High School
Ixchel Martinez Vazquez	Desert Hot Springs High School
Joey lopez	Valley View High School
Johnte Bouldin	Valley View High School
Jonah Zurer	John W. North High School
Joy Leon	Mission Vista Academy
Kiley Devore	Western Center Academy
Kimiko Kitayama	Canyon Springs High School
Layla Arciniega	Valley View High School
Lilith Haag	Valley View High School
Makayla Castaneda	Western Center Academy
Matthew Munguia	Canyon Springs High School
Nassani Gooden	Western Center Academy
Nicole Phan	Palm Desert High School
Savannah Wishon	Valley View High School
Vixen Brown	Valley View High School
Zack Romo	Valley View High School





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