

Poetic license: East High student named first Cedar Valley Youth Poet Laureate

[Holly Hudson Hill](#)



CEDAR FALLS — In an attempt to reach out to area youth, editors of the University of Northern Iowa's literary magazine North American Review launched a contest to name the first-ever Cedar Valley Youth Poet Laureate. The winner was announced at a commencement event on Saturday.

Lamya Pratchett, 18 and a student at Waterloo's East High School, was chosen as the winner after competition finalists read their poems in front of a full house at the Interpreters Theatre in Lang Hall on the UNI campus.

The event was the culmination of a competition in which teens living in the Cedar Valley could submit up to three poems. Eleven poets were chosen by NAR editors to compete at Saturday's event.

Musicians Justin Holmes on bass and Vince Rodomista on drums gave the whole evening a definite coffee house vibe.

Each of the 10 attending poets stepped in front of a microphone to read their poems.



Lamyia Pratchett is greeted by family after she is recognized as the winner of the 2024 Cedar Valley Youth Poet Laureate Competition at Lang Hall on the University of Northern Iowa campus on Saturday. CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

Along with being named youth poet laureate, Pratchett received a scholarship to UNI, \$250, an engraved medal and other prizes. She was also offered the opportunity to have her work published on the magazine's Open Space site.

Pratchett read three of her poems: "Chaotic Hindering Attributes Overthinkers Suffer With," "Love is my Soulmate" and "Emotionally Unavailable."

She has been writing since she was about 10 years old.

"I write about stuff I couldn't talk about, that other people didn't want to talk about. Life's problems, trauma. I like to write stuff for people to relate to."

She said her inspiration comes from her personal experiences and from other poets' work.

Pratchett has only read her work in public once before. "It was a small spoken-word event at the library."

She was nervous about reading her poetry in front of the crowd but had a number of supporters in the audience.

"Some family and some friends and two of my favorite teachers were there," she said. "That made me feel more comfortable, seeing their faces, and more confident.



Lamya Pratchett is recognized as the winner of the 2024 Cedar Valley Youth Poet Laureate Competition at Lang Hall on the University of Northern Iowa campus on Saturday. CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

Pratchett was impressed by her competition.

"I love how they all had something to share. Some of them hit really hard. I appreciate the other poets," she said.

Two runners-up also received scholarships and other prizes.

Maddie Gallagher of Cedar Falls High School was first runner-up and Mariana Torres of East High School was second runner-up.

Other finalists were Brooklyn Berumez, Ryan Herink and Perseus Batista-Pedro from Waterloo's West High School; Wynn Greenlee and Ripley Wakeham from UNI; Ren Woods from Starmont High School in Arlington; Joss Warnell from Green Mountain-Garwin High School; and Sapphire Lewis from Aplington-Parkersburg High School.



Lamya Pratchett is congratulated by English Professor Jeremy Schraffenberger after she is recognized as the winner of the 2024 Cedar Valley Youth Poet Laureate Competition at Lang Hall on the University of Northern Iowa campus on Saturday. CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

Judges for the event were poets Kim Groninga and Angie Sievers and UNI English professor and NAR editor Grant Tracey. Participants were judged on three criteria: Craft, creativity and expression.

"It was really close," Tracey said of the judging. "It was a tough decision. I thought all the poets were really brave. They made themselves vulnerable. They shared some very personal poetry."

Tracey said he couldn't be happier with how the event went.

"I came home glowing," he said. "We were hoping for a good turnout, and the room was packed. I'm proud of that."

"I'm proud these voices got to be heard and of the diversity of the poets and the diverse topics such as depression, race, gender identity. It was powerful hearing that coming from

young people. And it was kind of heartbreaking but (it was) empowering for them to speak to these issues with a certain level of dignity and authority,” said Tracey.

“I really think we have something here. The turnout was great. The audience was very supportive. I hope this is something we can keep growing.”

UNI’s Rachel Morgan, Jeremy Schraffenberger and Emily Stowe, all editors with the NAR, were instrumental in bringing the commencement to fruition.

In October and February Morgan and Schraffenberger held workshops for teens to write and share their work.

“About 20 students attended the workshops,” Schraffenberger said. “We are starting small, but hoping to get the word out so we can grow. We are hoping to reach more youth in the area.”



Ten finalists for the 2024 Cedar Valley Youth Poet Laureate Competition participated in an event at Lang Hall on the University of Northern Iowa campus on Saturday. CHRIS ZOELLER, Courier Staff Photographer

The North American Review is the oldest literary magazine in the United States and has been housed at UNI since 1969.

“We publish poetry, fiction, essays and visual art from around the world,” Schraffenberger said.

“The National Youth Poet Laureate Program has been around about 15 years,” he said. “We are doing this because we are trying to reach a different community we don’t normally reach. We have a national audience, but we would like to get more involved in the local community.

“We want to support a vibrant literary community in the Cedar Valley. We see that as part of our responsibility,” he said.

“Our mission is to produce great art and, in addition to that, to promote civic engagement and social impact. That includes reaching the youth of our community, telling them that their work matters, that their experiences matter. Poetry is the perfect vehicle for that.

“I was absolutely impressed with the students,” he said. “It is important to offer these types of opportunities to young people. ... They deserve a venue.

“Credit for how well the event turned out should go to all of our young poets. Their poems were not only beautifully crafted and original but also necessary. I was especially proud of how they performed with such confidence and grace. Their work truly was a gift. Now Lamya will carry that gift to others in our community as the first Cedar Valley Youth Poet Laureate.”

Schraffenberger said they will discuss Pratchett’s role as youth poet laureate, but it will include helping to teach future workshops.

“We believe young people have the ability to create important works of art, and they therefore deserve a venue to develop and share their ideas and experiences with the world,” he said. “In order to create, grow and sustain that venue, we hope to secure more funding and resources so that we can reach even more young people in the Cedar Valley.”

Donations can be made to the Cedar Valley Youth Laureate Program online at northamericanreview.org.