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Michigan Humanities Announces 2026 Poetry Out Loud State Champion

MT. PLEASANT, MI—Michigan Humanities and the Michigan Arts and Culture Council are pleased to announce that Eliza Aldridge, a senior at Leland Public School, is the 2026 Michigan Poetry Out Loud State Champion. Eliza’s Poetry Out Loud teacher is Jennifer Walter.

“I’ve really loved being a part of Poetry Out Loud for the past few years. As someone who hasn’t always loved or connected with poetry, this experience has helped me grow a deep appreciation and understanding for it. I’m so excited and grateful to be able to represent Michigan at the national finals, and I can’t wait!” said State Champion Eliza Aldridge on her experience participating in Poetry Out Loud.

Sixteen students representing their high schools participated in the Michigan Poetry Out Loud State Finals on Saturday, March 14, at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant. The first runner-up is Brooklyn Ford from Detroit Schools of Arts. The second runner-up is James Wigton from Detroit Catholic Central High School. The third runner-up is Habiba Banitaha from Star International Academy.

The competition, presented in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts, is part of a national program that encourages high school students to learn about great poetry through memorization, performance and competition. In recognition of America’s 250th anniversary, this year’s Poetry Out Loud program focused on poems that celebrate the rich tapestry of American history and culture. The 2025–26 Poetry Out Loud season marks the 21st year of the program, where an estimated 3,060 students and 77 teachers participated in Michigan.

“Each year, the Poetry Out Loud State Finals bring together high school students across Michigan to showcase their hard work, talent and passion for poetry through recitation. We are incredibly proud of the amazing students who participated in the program this year and can’t wait to cheer on our Michigan State Champion at the national competition,” said Jennifer Rupp, president and CEO of Michigan Humanities.

Poetry Out Loud starts in a high school classroom or at the local level with an area organization. Winners then advance to the state competition, and ultimately to the national level. For the Michigan State Finals, contestants recited works they memorized from the official Poetry Out Loud anthology. Eliza Aldridge recited "Chicago" by Carl Sandburg, "Introduction" by Alice Duer Miller and "A Lady" by Amy Lowell.

Eliza will compete in the national finals held in Washington, D.C., from April 27–29. Students from across the country will compete in the national semi-finals, and the top nine students will move on to the national finals. The Poetry Out Loud national finals will present a total of \$50,000 in awards and school/organization stipends, including a \$20,000 award for the Poetry Out Loud National Champion.

Michigan Poetry Out Loud is a partnership between Michigan Humanities and the Michigan Arts and Culture Council and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. In-kind support for this year's program is generously provided by Central Michigan University's College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences and Department of English Language and Literature, and the Library of Michigan.

For more information about Michigan's Poetry Out Loud program please visit michiganhumanities.org.

About Michigan Humanities

Michigan Humanities strives to bring people together through stories, histories, cultures, and conversations. In carrying out this mission, Michigan Humanities builds awareness and excitement for humanities in everyday life, achieves best practices and sustainability for all humanities programs and services in Michigan, and upholds the following key values: uplifting all Michiganders; discovery and understanding; authentic conversation; respectful collaboration; and meaningful experiences. Michigan Humanities' vision is a more thoughtful, connected, engaged, and informed Michigan.

About Michigan Arts and Culture Council

Michigan Arts and Culture Council is dedicated to ensuring that Michigan communities thrive from the civic, economic, and educational benefits of arts and culture. They envision a Michigan where communities celebrate creative expression and every person has access to, or participates in, arts and cultural experiences.

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