

Published June 21st, 2023

SMC's River of Words 2023, a youth art and poetry competition, sparked dramatic results

By Vera Kochan



"Made for Each Otter," Joy Y., 5th Grade, Georgia, Category II Grand Prize Winner Photo Vera Kochan

Although the Saint Mary's College art exhibit, "River of Words: The Natural World as Viewed by Young People," closed a few days ago, the winning entries that were on display left an indelible mark in the artistic world with regards to the imprint left by today's youth and their perceptions of our planet.

River of Words (ROW) was founded in 1995 by Pamela Michael, a writer and activist, along with Robert Hass, a former U.S. Poet Laureate and SMC alumnus. The program belongs to the Center for Environmental Literacy and is a part of the Kalmanovitz School of Education, pioneers in the field of place-based education. The ROW art and poetry competition is conducted in affiliation with the Library of Congress Center for the Book, is free to entrants, and is open internationally for children in kindergarten through the 12th grade. There are four categories with regards to age range: K-Grade 2, Grades 3-5, Grades 6-8, and Grades 9-12. A panel of 10 judges poured through more than 2,500 entries from

all over the world.

According to the SMC exhibit description, "As the world continues to evolve, it is crucial that we nurture a deep understanding and appreciation of our natural environment in the hearts and minds of the next generation." The exhibit offered "a unique glimpse into the perspectives of young people, presenting their visions of the natural world through a diverse array of artistic mediums and poetic expression. These young artists and poets remind us of the wonders of nature and the importance of preserving our planet for future generations."

On display were the works of more than 10 artistic finalists along with a binder of the winners in the poetry category. The entrants were asked to thoughtfully consider specific ideas, images or language; "show" the reader something either through a picture or with words; use images/words that will take people on a journey; have fun with forms and textures; feature a specific aspect, formation, ecosystem or organism of nature that resonates with you; show your scientific knowledge; get your inspiration from the outdoors by using all of your senses; and display an awareness of your global community.

A few of the artistic pieces were geared toward the ocean and its inhabitants with a visual commentary regarding pollution and the destruction of the ecosystem. On the other hand, most of the younger poetry finalists wrote about the beauty found in nature and the hope of its continuance; whereas the older finalists' poems expressed elements of sadness with the things mankind has done to create environmental disasters. Even in art, the innocence of youth gives way to the realities of the older and wiser.

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