May 20, 2013

Dear Colleagues,

We are delighted to announce that an 18-year-old girl in OYA’s care finished first in a national poetry contest, with poems by three other at-risk youth in our custody tying for third place.

Brianna Nicole Ireland’s poem, “Hell’s Angel,” took top honors at Words Unlocked, a competition sponsored by the Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings (CEEAS). Chelsea Clinton was among four judges who ranked Ireland’s poem first out of more than a thousand entries nationwide.

Poems by three other OYA youth tied for third place: “As the Grass Grows” by Stephen Jerome Fowler, 21; “Tell Me About Me” by Angela Denise Miller, 19; and “Split Personality” by Angel Whisper, 19. Brianna, Angela and Angel are held at Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility (YCF) and Stephen is at MacLaren YCF. A total of 16 OYA youth submitted poems for the competition. The top finishers were notified of their placements last week and a news release is being issued today.

The outcome of this competition proves what we already know about many of our kids: That their creativity, imagination and drive are not diminished because they are incarcerated. It also proves that we have some of the best educational programs among juvenile justice agencies in the country, staffed by some of the most dedicated and resourceful instructors and principals who teach and mentor at-risk youth.

We are also grateful to CEEAS and its executive director, David Domenici, for sponsoring this competition. April was National Poetry Month and entries for Words Unlocked were due May 3. Youth in more than 40 correctional facilities throughout the U.S. participated in the competition. Click here to read the top-ranked poems.

In addition to Ms. Clinton, judges for the competition included Bryonn Bain, R. Dwayne Betts and John Blake. CEEAS will award Brianna $100 and the third place finishers $25 each. All top finishers will also receive certificates, publication of their works in the first annual Words Unlocked poetry anthology, and a signed copy of A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison by Mr. Betts.

Please join us in congratulating Brianna, Stephen, Angela, Angel and the other youth who submitted poems. They are all winners.
Sincerely,

Fariborz Pakseresht
Director

Joe O’Leary
Deputy Director