

## Oxnard teen turns her struggles, pain into poetry

Claudia Boyd-Barrett, Special to Ventura County Star | Published Sept. 24, 2018 | Updated Sept. 25, 2018



*Unique Shehee and her foster mom, Leticia Woodruff, look together at a certificate of recognition Unique received for becoming the first Ventura County youth poet laureate.  
(Photo: CLAUDIA BOYD-BARRETT/SPECIAL TO THE STAR)*

Unique Shehee, 15, stood before a room of mostly strangers at the Museum of Ventura County last week and shared her deepest thoughts, her most painful childhood memories and her personal struggles.

In poised prose, she told them how she experienced homelessness as a child and about grappling with racism as early as elementary school.

“It is still a process, it is still a journey, but it is so damn beautiful,” she said, reading a poem she wrote called “Reflecting.”

“I look in the mirror and I think to myself, ‘Unique, oh, how far you have come.’”

And she has come far.

At the ceremony on Thursday, Unique, an Oxnard High School student, was recognized as Ventura County's first youth poet laureate, a position created by the nonprofit Ventura County Arts Council. As youth poet laureate, Unique plans to visit schools across the county over the next year to share her poetic works and encourage other young people to embrace the power of poetry.

"I want to talk to students about the importance of their voices being heard and the beautiful things you can do with poetry," said Unique, who began writing poetry around age 11. "I just want them to know there's this awesome way to express themselves, and tell them it's just such a great outlet."

Fernando Salinas, the Ventura County Arts Council's Literary Arts Program coordinator, said he came up with the idea of creating a youth poet laureate position after attending a poetry slam at Oxnard High School in 2017. Ventura County already has an adult poet laureate, Phil Taggart, but Salinas said he felt young people needed their own poetry representative.

"We need to allow youth to be heard. When we honor them and give them this kind of office, the community is more likely to listen," he said. "Quite often as we get older ... we get caught up with our lives so much we forget what's happening in youths' lives, and when they do speak up it's like, how did I miss that?"

California has just three other youth poet laureates, and there are only 42 across the nation, said Todd Collart, president of the arts council. Amanda Gorman, of Los Angeles, became the first national youth poet laureate in 2017.

Unique competed with nine other young poets for the laureate position, said arts council board member Friday Gretchen. Three of the finalists also read poems at the inauguration ceremony.

Angelina Leanos, a senior at Channel Islands High School in Oxnard, shared a poem in which she denounced discrimination against Latino immigrants and farmworkers. She said she was excited about the new youth poet laureate role.

"I think it's something we really need in the community, somebody to represent the youth and speak for us," she said. "There's such an expectation to accept things as they are and maybe not speak up about it. We really need someone to break that barrier."

Oxnard High School Principal Richard Urias said the school is proud of Unique's accomplishments. The school's teacher-librarian, Jennifer Brickey, has been collaborating with Salinas to bring poetry workshops to Oxnard High and has now hosted two poetry slams. Unique won the slam this year.

"There are talented kids everywhere," Urias said. "When you have the programs and supports, you allow the kids to shine. This poetry project has turned into allowing Unique to shine. It's basically become a catalyst for that."