

VERNON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Office of the Superintendent
30 Park Street • P.O. Box 600
Vernon, CT 06066-0600
Fax (860) 870-6005

Website: www.vernonpublicschools.org

Joseph Macary, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools
(860) 870-6000 ext. 4660

Robert Testa
Assistant Superintendent of Schools
(860) 870-6000 ext. 4676

For immediate release

July 18, 2022

Media Contacts:

David Owens, Communications Specialist
Desk (860) 870-3574
Cell (860) 494-5973

Rockville High School's Creative Writers Dominate Competitions and Win Acclaim for Their School

VERNON, Connecticut – Great things happen every day in the classrooms, labs and greenhouses at Rockville High School.

But something even more remarkable has been happening in Creative Writing Teacher Victoria Nordlund's classes. Her students have written and published poetry, fiction and non-fiction, won hundreds of awards, dominated writing competitions, and earned Rockville High School state and national acclaim.

In June, two of Nordlund's students, Kaylin Maher and Dakota Ouellette, stood on the stage at Carnegie Hall in New York City to receive awards and national recognition for their writing portfolios in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Dakota received a Gold Medal and Kaylin and Silver Medal with Distinction.

That level of success is not new. For more than 15 years Rockville High students have won more writing awards than students at any other public or private school in Connecticut.

Maher and Ouellette were joined by 27 fellow Rockville High School students, who together won 49 awards in the 2022 Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Students won 10 gold keys, 16 silver keys and 23 honorable mentions – the most of any high school in Connecticut. Muriel Stankeviciute received a 2022 American Voices nomination for best in show.

Rockville High School students also won a record 70 awards in UConn's 2022 Connecticut Student Writers contest. Rockville High students had 10 Platinum Published pieces, 10 Gold awards, 24 Silver awards, and 26 Honorable Mentions. Students were winners in every category -- fiction, poetry and non-fiction -- and won

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more awards than any other school in the state. Their work has been published in Connecticut Student Writers magazine, which can be viewed by clicking [here](#).

What's behind the students' success is a teacher who is a poet herself, committed to helping her students find their voices and express themselves in various forms of writing, and pushes them to publish and share their writing.



Some of Rockville High School's creative writing students who were published in the Connecticut Student Writers magazine.

"The creative writing courses build a community where people feel safe to express their feelings and safe to be who they are," said Nordlund, who has taught at Rockville High School for 32 years and began the Creative Writing program 20 years ago. "There's not a lot of space for that in places. I think our program thrives because of that community. It lets people develop their own voice."

Nordlund also brings guest speakers in to talk to students about the craft of writing. Novelists, playwrights, screenwriters, poets, and other writers describe how they got started, their writing process, their frustrations and helps students understand the creative process.

"It gives them a perspective on a real life author," Nordlund said. "They understand that the frustrations and struggles they experience as writers are not unique. Writing is not easy and requires revision after revision to make it better."

Students also visit museums, attend a Broadway play and participate in other creative events.

The students take their work far beyond Rockville High School. They represent Vernon at poetry readings and poetry slams, at the Connecticut Literary Festival at Real Art Ways in Hartford, and at the Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington. They also share their writing closer to home, with students in Vernon's elementary schools, residents of senior housing and at Arts Center East.

Having students share their writing through readings and contests is important, Nordlund said.

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Jason Courtmanche, an assistant professor in residence and Director of the Connecticut Writing Project at UConn, agrees.

“In the field of rhetoric and composition, we talk about audience and purpose,” he said. “The audience is typically the teacher and the purpose is a grade. That is not sufficiently motivating.”

If students do not have a real audience or purpose for their writing, why should they care, he asks.

“When a student realizes people are going to be reading this, that ups the ante a lot,” Courtmanche said. “What Vicky is doing is helping students find subject matter that is important and a genre they feel strong in. They take it seriously because they want to write about it. They care about it and they care what people think about them when they have something to say about it.”

Students gain confidence from the process, he said. “It’s such a validation to be published, to have someone say your words and ideas mean something. That means so much to a kid.”

Kaylin Maher, the Class of 2022 salutatorian and one of Nordlund’s students, said she was still in middle school when she learned about the writing program and decided to participate.

“It seemed like a great way to make friends and see if I would enjoy writing,” she recalled. “I’ve been able to delve into different styles of writing. I really like poetry and short stories. I also feel more comfortable externalizing a lot of emotions. Sharing vulnerable moments with other people has been important to me.”

Kaylin has also strengthened her public speaking skills through readings, and been able to travel thanks to her participation in the program.

And while she does not plan a career as a writer or in the arts, she said the experience she gained at Rockville High School has given her a love of writing that she expects will continue. She also thinks it will help her better communicate with patients as she pursues a career as a physician assistant.

“A lot of STEM people are kind of aloof when it comes to patient care and interacting with patients,” she said.

Nordlund said creative writing is beneficial to students whether they pursue a career in the arts or in business, science or any other field.

“It’s important to be creative and to be an innovator – an idea person – in any field you take on,” Nordlund said. “In any career, it’s important to be a problem solver. Part of problem solving is to be creative and to have a different perspective.”

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