



Charleston County School of  
the Arts

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## Media Release

### **SOA's Leitzel wins state poetry contest**

*Senior is also a U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts candidate*

**North Charleston, SC** – Jessie J. Leitzel, a senior Creative Writing Major at Charleston County School of the Arts (SOA), is a state champion in poetry. Leitzel won the South Carolina [Poetry Out Loud](#) competition on March 9, 2024, in Columbia.

The South Carolina Arts Commission coordinates Poetry Out Loud in South Carolina, partnering with the National Education Association and the Poetry Foundation to bring the competition to South Carolina 9-12 graders.

Leitzel was first runner up in 2023. As the new state champion, she received a \$200 prize. Leitzel recited "Diameter" by Michelle Y Burke in the first round, "I Remember, I Remember" by Thomas Hood in the second round, and "Old Men Playing Basketball" by B.H. Fairchild in the final round to win.

Leitzel will represent SOA and South Carolina at the Poetry Out Loud National Finals and compete against other state champions for the top honor in the country and a \$20,000 first prize. The national event is scheduled for April 30 - May 2, 2024, in Washington, D.C.

It has been a big year for Leitzel, who is also a National Merit semifinalist, regenerative medicine researcher, National Scholastic Writing Gold Medalist, published author, and literary magazine co-founder. Leitzel was also named one of 60 Presidential Scholars in the Arts candidates as part of the 2024 U.S. Presidential Scholars Program. The candidates were nominated from thousands of participants in the annual YoungArts, National Foundation for the Advancement of Artists' (YoungArts) competition.

"It's an honor to be part of such an incredible community of artists," explained Leitzel. "Being recognized as a nominee affirms for me that the work we do here [at SOA] matters, and that there is a place for the next generation of writers and creatives."

This U.S. Presidential Scholars honor came right after Leitzel attended an eight-day National YoungArts Week conference in Miami, FL, where the wordsmith was one of only three students in the nation to be awarded the YoungArts Award with Distinction in non-fiction. Leitzel wrote personal essays titled "The Deer I'll Never

Shoot" and "The Marshes Are Their Own Mountains," both of which explore Jessie's connection to landscape - namely, a small coal-mining town deep in the Pennsylvania mountains where family members and ancestors lived and labored and the vastly contrasting South Carolina Lowcountry where Leitzel has learned to build a new home.

During the week, Leitzel connected with 151 young artists across ten disciplines (including dance, film, theatre, photography, and writing) in interdisciplinary workshops and attended creative writing masterclasses with renowned writers such as Vanessa Garcia, Grace Talusan, Noel Quiñones, and guest speakers Ana Menéndez, Dr. Joan Morgan, and Christell Victoria Roach.

"In my 20 years of teaching, I would be hard-pressed to think of a young writer more gifted and more genuinely curious about the world around them," added F. Rutledge Hammes, Leitzel's creative writing teacher. "Jessie has more talent than almost anyone I know, coupled with a tireless desire to find ways of speaking more clearly and more powerfully to the world and those of us in it."

The U.S. Presidential Scholars Program was established in 1964 by Executive Order of the President to recognize some of our nation's most distinguished graduating seniors for their accomplishments in many areas: academic success, leadership, and service to school and community. It was expanded in 1979 to recognize students demonstrating exceptional scholarship and talent in the visual, creative, and performing arts. In 2015, the program was expanded once again to recognize students who demonstrate ability and accomplishment in career and technical fields. Annually, up to 161 U.S. Presidential Scholars are chosen from among that year's senior class, representing excellence in education and the promise of greatness in our nation's youth.

The 60 arts candidates were selected for their exceptional performance in the disciplines of dance, film/video, instrumental music, jazz, voice, photography, theater, visual arts, design, and creative writing. Further consideration will be based on students' essays, self-assessments, description of activities, school recommendations, and school transcripts. Of these, up to 20 will be selected as U.S. Presidential Scholars in the Arts.

"We are thrilled to celebrate these accolades with Jessie," said Dr. Shannon Cook, principal of SOA. "We are so proud of the accomplishments of this outstanding student artist."

The Commission on Presidential Scholars, a group of up to 32 eminent citizens appointed by the President, will select the finalists, and the U.S. Department of Education will announce the Scholars in May.

U.S. Presidential Scholars are honored for their accomplishments during the National Recognition Program each June. To commemorate their achievement, the Scholars are awarded the Presidential Scholars Medallion.

For more information about the U.S. Presidential Scholars program, email

[PSP@scholarshipamerica.org](mailto:PSP@scholarshipamerica.org) or call (507) 931-8345.

For more information about Leitzel, contact Dr. Shannon Cook at (843) 529-4990.

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**About the Charleston County School District**

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves approximately 50,000 students in 88 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse portfolio of educational options and specialized programs delivered to the students of CCSD through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools and programs. Rich educational opportunities for students include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; military; dual credit; and many more.