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Community Members Connect Through Poetry and Love of the Morro Bay Estuary

The Morro Bay National Estuary Program's poetry contest asks people to capture the essence of the Morro Bay estuary in haiku and free verse poems. This year, three guest judges carefully considered the record 101 poems submitted to the contest. Karen Kirby, a first-time guest judge who moved to the Central Coast a year ago, was inspired by the contest entries. She said, **"I was so touched by the love, respect, and appreciation for the estuary by the local poets. As a newcomer, I'm amazed every single day by the beauty of Morro Bay, and it was lovely to see that lifelong residents feel the same and don't take this incredibly special place for granted."**

On Friday, May 18, community members gathered at Coalesce Bookstore's Garden Chapel to celebrate the contest winners and to connect with one another through their shared love of Morro Bay. The contest judges read first, sharing nature-themed poetry that inspired them and reading their own work about the Morro Bay estuary. Returning contest judge and San Luis Obispo County Poet Emeritus Kevin Patrick Sullivan debuted a new prose poem that he had written just for the occasion. Sullivan said he was proud to serve on the selection committee again and that reading all of the entries gave him, "firsthand knowledge that people care about and want to protect the estuary and its beauty and diversity of life."

After the judges' reading, the winning poets took the stage. Gavin Hughes, a senior at Paso Robles High School, read his winning free verse poem, "The Osprey," to the crowd. He drew inspiration for the poem from childhood outings to Sweet Springs Nature Preserve with his grandparents. Standing at the front of the Garden Chapel, Gavin said he was happy to attend the reading with his parents, who had gotten married in the same spot where he stood.

Los Osos Middle School Student Zeke Taylor won second place in the youth haiku category for his poem, "Tide." He had hoped to attend the event, but landed a new job and had to work his first shift instead. Zeke's parents attended the celebration in his place, and his dad offered to read Zeke's winning poem aloud. It was his first time attending a poetry reading, and he told the crowd that he was moved by the experience of hearing the winning poems and feeling the writers' connection to the estuary.

These personal moments, shared between poets and community members who love the Morro Bay estuary, defined the evening.

To find the full list of contest winners and to read their winning poems, visit mbnep.org/poetry2018.