

We choose Albany public schools because ...

Elks contest lets freedom ring

“I am free because I feel free! The sound of those words fills me with pride.”

Those are the words of Isabella Serena Higgins, a fourth-grader at Albany School of Humanities (ASH) and one of 16 district students honored by Albany Elks Lodge 49 for outstanding essays they wrote on the subject “What Freedom Means to Me.”

Serena was one of 380 students from 10 Albany public schools who participated in a city-wide essay contest sponsored by Lodge 49. Her work and other top essays were showcased Jan. 8 at a “Celebration of Freedom” ceremony at the Albany Elks Lodge, 25 South Allen St.



Hackett Middle School sixth-grader Kitty Sharp reads her freedom essay during the school's Inauguration Day assembly Jan. 20.

Finalists read their essays at the celebration. Each first-place winner received a \$100 savings bond and each second-place winner a \$50 savings bond. Each honorable mention received a \$10 gift certificate, and all students who submitted essays received certificates.

“Some of my ancestors were slaves and did not have the same rights as I do now,” wrote Serena, who took first place for her grade. “When I think of freedom, I say I am my own person and nobody can change that. Everyone deserves freedom. No matter where they live, what their religion is or anything else.”

Lodge 49's essay contest is part of an annual national Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks program to promote patriotism.

Lodge members reviewed the Albany schools' essays in December and will submit top entries from fifth- through eighth-graders to a statewide essay competition. If selected, those essays will be forwarded to Elks USA to compete in a national contest in July. First-place winners at the national level will receive a \$1,000 savings bond and second-place winners will receive a \$500 savings bond.

Janelly Durr's vision of freedom was inspired by her grandfather's flight from Cuba.

“My grandfather escaped a death order from Fidel and traveled to America through shark-filled waters. Yes, real sharks!” wrote the Thomas O'Brien Academy of Science

and Technology (TOAST) sixth-grader. “He was one of the lucky ones that made it, but saw many relatives perish on their journey to freedom. Imagine dying just to reach land that’s free? Let freedom ring.”

Following is the list of award recipients:

Third Grade

First Place – Adriannah Saunders, New Scotland Elementary School

Second Place – Zylar Jones, Eagle Point Elementary School

Honorable Mention – Mara Strich, Pine Hills Elementary School

Fourth Grade

First Place – Isabella Serena Higgins, ASH

Second Place – Devon Grace O’Connell, ASH

Honorable Mention – Cailey Wolfgang, New Scotland Elementary School

Fifth Grade

First Place – Jamie Curcio, New Scotland Elementary School

Second Place – Kevmon Smith, TOAST

Sixth Grade

First Place – Janelly Durr, TOAST

Second Place – Aaliyah Gillespie, North Albany Academy

Honorable Mention – Kitty Sharp, William S. Hackett Middle School

Seventh Grade

First Place – Jeremy David, Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School

Second Place – Julie Salinero, Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School

Eighth Grade

First Place – Justin Santos, William S. Hackett Middle School

Second Place – Collin K. Smith, Middle School Alternative Program

Honorable Mention – Shamekia Perelez, Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School

Connie McNally, a reading specialist at North Albany Academy and a member of Lodge 49’s Americanism Committee, coordinated the contest.