

2024 Peace Poetry Contest

Alachua County Schools *Grades K-12*

A collection of the winning poems from the fourteenth annual Peace Poetry Contest in Alachua County schools, grades K-12, sponsored by the Gainesville Chapter 14 of Veterans for Peace.



About the Peace Poetry Contest

This is the fourteenth year that Gainesville Veterans for Peace has organized the Peace Poetry Contest in Alachua County, where all students, grades K–12, are encouraged to submit one original poem focusing on their interpretation of “peace.”

Veterans for Peace members believe that peace-making and hope for a peaceful world begin in our community, our homes, and our schools. That is why we invited students to participate in the contest this year; a peaceful possibility lies in the younger generations of today who will be leading, transforming, and inspiring the world tomorrow.

Though this contest holds no formal position on the current state of world affairs, we still want to honor the ideal of peace through the perspectives of young people. Peace is a uniquely human conception and affirms the human spirit. It is especially important to remember that peace is not merely a goal but a human right. In that spirit of reflection, we are very pleased with the success of this year’s contest.

This year we received over 140 poems from first through twelfth grades, and the poems were judged by a panel of community and Veterans for Peace members. The winners were invited to read at the Peace Poetry Reading, and their poems are published in this book.

Veterans for Peace would first and foremost like to thank all of the participants in the Peace Poetry Contest. Without the poetry submissions, there would be no Peace Poetry Contest and none of the dialogue that comes with it.

Parents and teachers also play a large role in the Peace Poetry Contest every year by encouraging their children to participate. Thank you for helping make the Peace Poetry Contest a success.

Because of the trying circumstances over the last few years, we are especially grateful for the students and teachers who still felt inspired to submit Peace Poems.

Maryjane Cook and Skylar Scott were integral to this year’s contest and the Reading. Thank you.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Gainesville has hosted the Peace Poetry Contest for fourteen years now, and Veterans for Peace is grateful for their support and continued cooperation. Specifically, thank you to UUF and VFP member Mary Bahr who helps with the arrangements for the Reading.

About the Peace Scholarship

Earlier this year, Veterans for Peace announced the tenth annual Peace Scholarship award, a college scholarship program for Alachua County students. The scholarship competition was open to eligible high school seniors, college students, and adults who need financial support to succeed in college or vocational/apprenticeship/career training programs, and who have demonstrated a commitment to activities including: social justice and peace, coalition building, Black Lives Matter, conflict resolution and/or non-violent social change.

Peace scholarship applicants were asked to provide a brief autobiographical statement and evidence of leadership and/or personal initiative in activities in an organization (including volunteer or paid work) relating to peace and social justice, conflict resolution, and/or nonviolent social change. Applicants were also asked to provide two letters of recommendation. In the end, VFP awarded peace scholarships to four students in the amount of \$1,500 each. The scholarships were awarded to the individuals below.

Makayla Flanders is a pre-nursing major at Florida A&M University. Makayla is a Conflict Resolution Peer at Florida A&M. She is also an active member of the NAACP and the College Democrats and has lobbied on behalf of progressive legislation at the State Legislature. Makayla's organizing work in the Black Lives Matter movement in Gainesville helped earn her the Edna M. Hart Keeper of the Dream Scholarship in 2023. One of Makayla's recommenders noted that, "She believes in activism, which she lives by being involved with young people getting registered to vote. She believes in lifting others and economic empowerment, which she lives by participating in many food drives during and after the pandemic." "Once I complete Nursing School," Makayla writes, "I plan to utilize my degree by providing aid to my community by hosting clinic days on the East Side of Gainesville, and I plan to start a scholarship to provide funds for two students each year to assist them with obtaining an education the same way I did."

Charlotte Rose Leavins served 7 years in the United States Marine Corps as a military police officer including combat deployments to Iraq beginning in 2006. Currently enrolled as a student at Santa Fe College, Rose's letter writers commended her for her direct work assisting homeless veterans find clothing, shelter, and health care. Rose is known for always being on call in the local veterans' community. She writes, "There have been instances where a veteran would call me in the middle of the night needing to talk, and I am always available to them. In addition, I know other veterans who have been incarcerated due to their PTSD and depression or due to medications, and I have served as a liaison between those veterans and the Veterans Treatment Court." Rose plans to earn her Master of Social Work degree and to specialize in substance abuse counseling with veterans and to help combat veterans' transition peacefully back into society.

Caleb Little is a senior at P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School in Gainesville. He is active in efforts to stop gun violence and has participated in numerous panels,

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theatrical performances, and events including the 5th Avenue Arts festival where he has promoted messages of creative nonviolence, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and economic justice. Caleb volunteers with Star Theatre Inc., where he serves as a junior counselor focused on encouraging younger local students to become involved in the arts. One of his nominators wrote, “His humble demeanor, great stature, unassuming personality, great intelligence and love for people is noticeable when you have a conversation with him; but more importantly, if you watch his life, work ethnics and passion, there is no doubt this is a very special young man.” Caleb’s activism in the community has earned him the Patricia Hilliard-Nunn Cultural Ambassador Award. He plans to enroll in Tallahassee Community College in the fall and to eventually earn his law degree at Florida A&M University.

Janie Zhang is a first-generation college student and a pre-med major enrolled at the University of Florida. Her letter writers praised Janie’s indefatigable volunteer work in the community. She writes, “I am involved with the Human Rights Coalition of Alachua and am dedicated to defending human rights on issues such as immigration, education, poverty, and equality. Janie is a member of the local chapter of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Especially concerned with gender inequalities in the United States, Latin America, and China, Janie writes, “Our goal is to spread more awareness regarding the inequalities that women face and to support women’s rights and to educate women from diverse backgrounds.” Janie’s goal is become a medical provider, and she writes, “I aspire to be a social justice educator and researcher...I believe that my journey is driven by a purpose to serve and aid others.”

To learn more about the VFP Peace Scholarship so you can apply next year, visit vfp Gainesville.org. There you will find detailed instructions and the application for the scholarship.

Winning Poets

Ellie Jones, 1st Grade, Jordan Glen School

Damian Winter, 1st Grade, Joseph A. Williams Elementary School

David Greene, 2nd Grade, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Mason Micieli-Voutsinas, 2nd Grade, Jordan Glen School

Caroline Staley, 2nd Grade, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Maya Jerome, 3rd Grade, Hidden Oak Elementary School

Dodger Smith, 3rd Grade, Homeschool

Niko Adelinis, 4th Grade, Jordan Glen School

Naveyh Angell, 4th Grade, Chester Shell Elementary School

Ziva Kilbourne, 5th Grade, Hidden Oak Elementary School

Niva Ranjit, 5th Grade, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School

Kyana Lacy, 7th Grade, Howard Bishop Middle School

Ellie Aponick, 8th Grade, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Melina Bazar, 8th Grade, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School

Kaitlan Josephs, 8th Grade, Howard Bishop Middle School

Henry McGinley, 8th Grade, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Valeria Morales, 8th Grade, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Noor Salmani, 8th Grade, Howard Bishop Middle School

Brooke Walker, 8th Grade, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Zoltahn Jacobson, 12th Grade, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research
School

Ja'mani Watson, 12th Grade, Hawthorne High School

Rachel Xu, 12th Grade, Eastside High School

Peace

Peace is cozy.
Peace is love.
Peace is when someone loves you for being you.

Ellie Jones
Grade 1, Jordan Glen School

Peace is harmony
Peace is for everyone
Power doesn't matter
Peace is when no one is fighting
Peace is two people sharing an orange

Racism is bad
Racism takes families apart
Racism hurts people's feelings
People should be equal
No matter the color of their skin, their gender, or how much money they have
You shouldn't judge people by the way they look

Damian Winter
Grade 1, Joseph A. Williams Elementary School

If You Care for the Earth, Our Earth Won't Forget You

The Earth is great, and so are you,
and if you care for the earth, it will never forget you.

So, pick up that trash, and please don't litter,
and it will make all of Earth have a great shinning glitter!

David Greene
Grade 2, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy



“The Peace Dragon”

The world is like a dragon
Full of flaming fire
Ready to explode
But we'd rather be a flower,
And help each other grow
We want the world to flow
Like a flying crow.
Bringing peace to and fro.

Mason Micieli-Voutsinas
Grade 2, Jordan Glen School

My Heart

My heart is open
the lights are on
the sun is shining brightly
but something is gone.

Caroline Staley
Grade 2, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Peace in the Streets

People fought all their lives
To face against guns and knives

People fought for all race
every person, every face

“No more violence!” is what they said
To face against the world in dread

They gave their lives for you and me
To live in the world we now see

People like: Malcolm X, MLK Jr., Rosa Parks
To face against the world they barked

We live in our world today
because of what they had to say

Maya Jerome
Grade 3, Hidden Oak Elementary School

The End of War

Peace is wonderful,
Loving
Caring
Peace is the end of war,
Destruction
Devastation
Mutilation
Peace feels like honey,
Sweet love to my brother.
Peace would be like chocolate.
Eating the chocolate,
And it tastes wonderful.
Candy is like the taste of the end of war.
Eating it feels like all war will stop.

Dodger Smith
Grade 3, Homeschool

“What Color Is the World?”

What color is the world?
Red for love,
Green for growth,
Blue for peace.

But right now, it is gray for death,
Brown for litter,
Black for smoke and smog.

Why should it be red, green, and blue?
Because kids need to live bright, colorful lives,
Together, united, in a bright, colorful world.

Niko Adelinis
Grade 4, Jordan Glen School



Stop Being Racist

stop being racist it's not polite

stop being racist it's not a fight

stop being racist it is a crime
and maybe one day you will see why

we are all human it shouldn't matter
our skin color should not be a factor

and if black and white may come together

this whole wide world will be so much better

Naveyh Angell

Grade 4, Chester Shell Elementary

Kora's Diary

(This is about World War II and a girl named Kora that is really scared. Over the course of days, it gets worse.)

Dear diary, please let this war be over.
It's creating such a fuss.
We didn't need this war to come over.
Why is this happening to us?

Dear diary, it's getting worse.
I'm scared everyday.
How will I survive this curse?
I don't know what to do or say.

Dear diary, I pray for Peace.
Let the soldiers use stealth
So the war can cease.
I hope for good rest, good feasts, and good health.

Dear diary, the war has ended.
But my heart has not yet mended.
Although I find relief.
I am overcome with grief

Ziva Kilbourne

Grade 5, Hidden Oak Elementary

Poem for Peace

At the breath of dawn
where the shadows retreat
lies a whisper of hope
stirring the air so sweet
As the meadow of bloomed flowers
slowly opening their petals

Across border and boundaries
Peace weaves its thread
A blanket of unity wrapped
Where empathy is spread

However in crowded streets
When peace falls asleep
And voices rise
Social justice awakens
And pot these voices at ease
Protest for rights
And demanding change
Peace and justice calm their path

The warm smiles of the world unite us all together
And brings peace, kindness, and social justice
To everyone and everything.

Niva Ranjit

Grade 5, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School



Play a game but make no moves
Sing a song without the grooves
Finesse through chess
Change the world in a chair, talking
You sit and talk, won't go nowhere
Can't play a game with talk
So change the world with talk
Won't work, will it
Lose the queen
Use the rook
Lose the rook
Use the Pawn
Win the game
But to win you need to
Make a move

Kyana Lacy
Grade 7, Howard Bishop Middle School

A Dark World

A once peaceful abyss
Has fallen to bits
Peace has been shattered
The world now tattered
Instead of peace
Our fears increase
We are scared of our world

The thought of peace is far too deep
The world has slowly fallen sleep
It doesn't dream
It only fears
It cries for help and drops a tear

Peace seems too far to reach
But by a simple thing called speech
We can wake the world
Together we can lift our world out of the dark and into the light
The light of peace we will ignite

Ellie Aponick
Grade 8, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Wrong New Life

While you close your eyes
blood drips from your hand.
While you close your eyes
children are dying.

You see all these things
yet you force your eyes shut.
They are dying but so are their rights.
They can't walk outside without putting up a fight.

Doesn't this ring a bell of a past life,
where they were kicked out
for not being "right"?
So they left to build a new life.
A new life where they're doing the same thing.
Killing people for just wanting to live.

So tell me why
you still close your eyes,
when people are building
the wrong new life

Melina Bazar

Grade 8, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School

Unnoticed

The vast clear land,
So calm and peaceful,
That vast clear land
Where you stand
Was the home of many
Who retreat
to now declining woods
Again and again
They seem to go unnoticed
The sound of their cries
Drowned out by crowded city highs
The summer skies
So pretty and so meek.
Their homes are being torn down
Scorched by a raging fire
burning trees to ashy ground

It will never seem to rest
The deep slumber of animals
Only people know how to cause best...
Not just land but under ground too
somehow we went through
to somewhere new
To deep blue
to kill off lives
with oil that clouds their eyes
That makes the oceans
even darker at night
They seem to go unnoticed.
They go to a new home
they hope one day to be left alone
to rest easy
to die peacefully
to raise young
where all they know is a happy home
Have a life with no worries
no fears
no fright
just might
It just might happen
if destruction wasn't a first option
Of a cursed mind
Who doesn't seem to notice what happens outside of their own personal life
The blurry eyes
Masked by blurry lies
This is a problem you can't simplify
To a person with even the sharpest mind
People and creatures will never see eye to eye
Animals mourn the death of their young that died
To feel they barley tried
To feel empty inside
To feel there's a missing piece of a puzzle that's so...
Men with money
Make that money
By stealing the lives
of those that should be free and alive
outside of a stuck inside, mind, set them free to be what they should be
I can say this a thousand times more
And still...
They seem to go unnoticed

Kaitlan Josephs
Grade 8, Howard Bishop Middle School

A Nation at War

A nation at war
With grief at its core
Once full of peace and love
Now filthy, and poor.

It is destroyed by its own hate
Like loose bottles on a ship, in a crate.
Their lack of equality
Caused environmental harm
Which led to an increase in poverty
Now the land has nothing but barren farms.

This failure
This economical fumble
Causes their nation to crumble.

Henry McGinley

Grade 8, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

We are Refugees...

We are refugees of war
We are refugees of peace
We are refugees of things
We are refugees of thoughts

We are hidden from the truth
We are hidden in the lie
We are hidden from one another
We are hidden from ourselves

We are blind
We are deaf
We are selfish
We are dead

We are refugees every time
When we choose not to love
But if we want to be free
And live in love and peace
There is only one way and it will always be the same
So, let's love each other and care...

Valeria Morales

Grade 8, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Palestine

From the river to the sea Palestine will be free, just let them be
oh, we plea, end the genocide, put our differences aside
we can at least try before they **die**
Try to speak up, it's antisemitism
Women and children in prison
They say "History doesn't repeat itself" but before us we see colonization
No reincarnation this beautiful place can not be replaced
Palestine will always leave a trace that can't be erased
They are not talking homes, their home is being taken
"Cease Fire", but when, analyze all these lives, these large tolls
look at the roll, the whole, the control
This silence isn't peace, believe, relieve their grief
There is no maybe for humanity
This is not "just"
They are crushed
They are bruised
Palestine deserves justice
No war goes to this degree
We're hurt and hoping to recover
Palestine is not a fighter, simply a defender, not an offender
75 years later, their position no greater
75 years, we're tired, but still trying
we're stabbed, but still standing
75 years, we're wounded still wondering
we're mighty and merciful
Take a step back and backtrack to unpack
Palestine raises a white flag, they still attack
This time of the past, the present, and the future
None, on the the side of Palestine
They joke and cry while these innocent people die
Smoke fills the sky
Hospital, homes, humans in flames
We have the power to stop this today
Boycott and branch out
Grateful and graceful
lay down the arms, so we may reach out our arms to one another
We are brave enough to see it
We are brave enough to free it
Palestine we hear you plea, Palestine, you **will** be free

Noor Salmani

Grade 8, Howard Bishop Middle School

A Quest for World Peace

Across wide seas and distant lands,
Refugees seek open hands,
From shattered homes they flee in fear,
Their dreams displaced, their futures unclear.

Let borders blur and hearts unite,
To offer comfort in the darkest night,
With sympathy as our guiding light,
We'll build a world where all take flight.

For every soul, a place to belong,
Where acceptance thrives and hatred's gone,
In unity, we can all be strong,
And forge a path where peace belongs.

Brooke Walker

Grade 8, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Think Hard Before Starting a War

grieving mothers echo through the rubble-strewn streets,
where earth has tasted the bitter tears of war.
the scars of violence mar landscapes once with life,
when the stars fell, when the seas boiled and the earth burned
war's insatiable appetite for devastation consumed
leaving behind only a desolate terrain strained with sorrow.
creatures complex and hurting
lay down your arms.
we are all of us,
just beings breathing.

Zoltahn Jacobson

Grade 12, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School

Symphony of Unity

In the heart of the city where dreams intertwine,
There's a vision of Justice, all hopes combine.
People of different shades have begun to stick together,
In a world once divided, now stronger than ever.

Peace, a concept in which we boldly need and weave,
Within the fabric of society, in what we believe.
Each thread is a different story, each holds our own voice,
In the quilt of equality, we make the choice.

To uplift those of the fallen, to heal the divides,
Where Social Justice and Peace collides.

In unity we find and obtain the power to mend,
The chaos and the wrongs, we have to end.
Allow everyone their own chance to thrive,
One nation under God, we will all maintain the same drive
Let's form a world where peace and justice survive.

No more chains or silent cries,
Beneath the open, big blue skies.
We will plant the seeds of fairness flower,
Allow it to bloom with grace, not brute power.
In the symphony of life, every voice is heard.
No voice is too far or small, no plea is absurd.
Together we shall rise, in a unity's dance,
Crafting a future, the moment we're given the chance.

Let us dream, let us dare.
To spread peace and love everywhere.
For the pulse in humanity's heart is beating,
A symphony of love, so captivating and fleeting.

Ja'mani Watson
Grade 12, Hawthorne High School

rainstorm on a school day

“Miami will be underwater by 2100”
the doomsday radio hosts portend, their filtered discourse
intermingling with the thrumming downpour outside –
lost to the white noise of unabating rainfall and muted disinterest.

on the bus, I lean my forehead against tepid glass,
peering through the window at a smattering of
gossamer teardrops, each streaming earthbound
with tenuous fervor in an imaginary race, merging and
cleaving apart to the cadence of pocket-sized rapids;
around us, the cloudburst comes in fits and starts,
a deluge of erroneous forecasts/pilfered rain checks.

tentative, we turn the corner onto the intersection,
showering passerby with milky freshwater breakers;
in the distance, chain linked fences patrol the projects --
households forged from scattered brick shingles and faucets that
regurgitate swollen lead tides coming and going
in pewter-tinted rivulets, receding back towards inexorable thirst:
symptoms of existential negligence or partisan corrosion?

nearby turbid fluid run(s) off, flushed across the sidewalk
down into oxidized storm drains; opposite the traffic guard,
children take cover under cartoonishly oversized backpacks
as they pelt along asphalt puddles in barefooted rhapsody.

Spotify shuffles through another playlist and while
adjusting my lopsided earbuds, a hopeless notion flits past –
an invocation, some whimsical longing to
 unwind the skein of time,
before oil wells pierced our delicate loam, asphyxiating avarice
 wringing dry the stolen lands and petrol-soaked oceans;
before we clogged our carbon sink with rhetorical rubbish, plastic lids and
 emptied promises lining our riverbeds in synthetic decomposition;
before noxious gas fled from their coal-fired power plants,
 engulfing our glaciers in flammable atrophy –
 a global waterboard of fish bones and ossifying metropolises.

 here, I scribble half-finished love letters to the next generation
in hopes of sheathing clean slates from putrid contamination;
delay the clock just long enough to pivot our world on its tilted axis
and resuscitate every poison-laced mangrove, every drowned saltmarsh –
rewrite the futures for families who have not yet been born.

but as the overcast retires its wrath for another season,
the tiger-striped school bus jostles its way to my stop; I step
with newfound reverence onto drenched pavement,
taste humid petrichor on my lips, and pray there will be
a next time to savor these rainy afternoons.

Rachel Xu

Grade 12, Eastside High School

Thank You, Teachers!

Without the teachers of Alachua County who encourage their students to participate in the contest each year, there would be no Peace Poetry Contest. Veterans for Peace would like to publicly recognize those teachers who participated this year.

Erica Belforti, Hidden Oak Elementary School

Caroline Boudreaux, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Nicole Christie, Jordan Glen School

Jeff Davis, Jordan Glen School

Hayley Delapena, Hidden Oak Elementary School

Madie Hamblen, Chester Shell Elementary School

Susan Hansen, P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School

Marissa McDonald, Queen of Peace Catholic Academy

Gowri N., Jordan Glen School

Laura Parrinello, Howard Bishop Middle School

Edward Sambrano, Hawthorne High School

Kim Smith, Jordan Glen School

Whitney Veras, Howard Bishop Middle School

Genaveve Wooten, Jordan Glen School

*Veterans for Peace would
like to specially thank
Gainesville's own*

Alivia Regan Hunter

*for performing at the
2024 Peace Poetry
Reading*

Special thanks to **Deborah Hendrix** of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida. For her dedication since the beginning of the Peace Poetry Contest to recording the Reading and producing a high-quality video each year for all to enjoy.

