

Published November 19th, 2014

Lafayette Youth Arts Society Contest Kicks Off

By Diane Claytor



2013-14 Lafayette Youth Arts Society Creativity prize winner in photography Clare Needs chose this photo for the colors and how it emphasized the rule of thirds. Photo Clare Needs

With her long flowing hair and fashionably tight and torn jeans, 15-year-old Uma Unni looks like a typical teenager. But this Acalanes High School sophomore is not spending hours hanging out at the mall or endlessly playing video games. She is much too busy!

In middle school, Unni developed a love of fiction writing but discovered there was no way, other than through schoolwork, to find out if her writing was actually good. Through research, she found an essay competition run by England's Royal Commonwealth Society. Born in the UK and holding dual citizenship, Unni qualified to enter. She won a prize, which, she said, was a "huge confidence booster. I learned that I did have the ability to write." She figured there must be other kids like her, kids who love to write but didn't know how to capitalize on their talent. This gave her an idea.

The summer before entering high school, Unni and a friend founded the Lafayette Youth Arts Society (LYAS), "an organization run by kids, for kids ... to provide a place for the kids of Lafayette to showcase their artistic talents." It was going to be a fun summer project. "We didn't talk to or get permission from anyone at the beginning. We set up the website, decided what we wanted the

organization to be and then started making contacts."

They developed a mission statement: "... to create a contest that isn't so much about competition, but about inspiring a love of writing and photography in kids." They wrote letters, sent emails, made phone calls. The "summer project," which, Unni said, "we naively imagined would be a simple contest" open to Lafayette middle schoolers, soon spilled into the fall and Unni's friend had to limit her involvement. Unni was entering high school and "my parents were afraid the contest work would interfere with my school and music. They finally agreed to let me continue as long as I kept my grades steady."

Unni wrote more letters, made more phone calls. Famed author Daniel Handler, better known as Lemony Snicket, signed on as a writing judge. Unni contacted the three Lafayette middle schools and received tremendous support. She contacted the City of Lafayette and got mention on their website as well as a week of advertising on the community billboard; contacting the Chamber of Commerce resulted in a social media blitz to spread the word. Numerous local businesses provided gift cards to use as prizes and a large banner was printed at no cost. Unni met with teachers, city and business leaders, local clubs. "I think that's what really brought us success," she exclaimed, "the community was behind us every step of the way."

And they were successful. In its first year, the LYAS writing and photography contests attracted almost 150 entries. According to Unni, the judges all commented on the high quality of the entries, with several stating "it was almost impossible to choose just one winner."

LYAS' second annual writing and photography contest began Nov. 15 when the topics/ themes were announced on the website, lyas.org. It closes on Jan. 30, 2015; winners will be announced in March. Robert Haas, former U.S. Poet Laureate and both a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award

winner, has already agreed to serve as a judge. The other judges are Alison Burke, a retired Miramonte English and Spanish teacher and Rod Twain, a former middle school English, history and government teacher; he is currently substituting at Orinda Intermediate School. Photographers Morris Johnson and Gary Crabbe will be judging the photo entries. Thanks to community donations and sponsors, there are cash prizes ranging from \$250 for first prize to \$100 for third prize winners. Unni expects more competitors this year because of increased publicity.

Additionally, this year's photography contest is going international. Unni's godmother teaches at a middle school in Denmark and several teachers there are turning the photography contest into a class project. "We're planning on giving the same photo themes to the American and Danish kids," Unni said, "and we're excited to see the world through the lenses of kids of the same age but on different continents."

Obviously, as she promised her parents, Unni kept her grades up. She and LYAS' vice president, Zoe Portnoff, a sophomore at Campolindo, are working together on this year's contest. Both Unni and Portnoff are occasional contributors to Lamorinda Weekly.

Looking ahead, Unni, who also loves technology, plans to continue writing, and hopes to find a university where she can pursue a dual major in English and computer science. As for LYAS, they now have liaisons at the Lafayette middle schools who will be in high school when Unni and Portnoff go off to college. "It's our hope," she said, "that they'll carry on the contest, recruit more liaisons and keep this going for years."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA