



Pinellas Education Foundation

Students Shine with Stellar Variety at the 16th Annual Walker's Rising Stars

ST. PETERSBURG (May 14, 2019) – Behind the Mahaffey Theater's burgundy velvet curtain, 18 of Pinellas County Schools' most talented juniors and seniors stood shoulder to shoulder, some fidgeting, some making nervous conversation to dispel the pressure of the moment, others breathing deeply in the silence of their thoughts.

After seven months of hard work, intensive practice and surviving multiple rounds of judging, it had come down to this Tuesday night in the 16th annual Walker's Rising Stars Scholarship Competition: a waiting game as PCS Superintendent Dr. Michael Grego sung their praises on the other side of the curtain to the appreciative crowd – comprised of school and local business officials, sponsors, family members of the contestants, teachers and classmates.



Students wait anxiously backstage before learning the results.

"Although these students perform in a variety of disciplines, there's one thread that ties this all together," he said. "These students put forth a tremendous amount of time and effort to achieve the level of greatness that we witnessed this evening."

The night started with a production number featuring many of the finalists regardless of their genre, singing and doing a lively, choreographed performance of *There's No Business Like Show Business*. That, plus the show-stopping house band – the Tarpon Springs High School Jazz Ensemble – set the tone for the dazzling and varied display of gifts that followed. And now it was approaching the grand reveal.



Longtime co-hosts Melissa and Jim Myers get ready to reveal the winners in the competition.

The man whose name graces the competition, and who co-founded the event with the Pinellas Education Foundation, Dr. Jeffrey Walker, added his own tribute to the performers. Then he punctuated it with his signature, soaring shout-out, “Please join me in giving a hand to this year’s *Walker’s Rising Stars!*” With that, the curtain rose on the excited and anxious participants as longtime co-hosts Jim and Melissa Myers stepped back into the spotlight to call each category group forward.



Dr. Jeffrey Walker

It was a scene packed with the tension and anticipation of any network TV talent show, and this one – a mix of *American Idol*, *The Voice*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Top Chef* and more – was no different. Each group was showered with the boisterous cheers and applause that had filled the theater all evening. And one by one, as third-place and second-place finishers were announced, the elated winners emerged amid ovations that pushed the decibels even higher.

The names called included a class Valedictorian with a passion for cooking; a jazz singer with fluid, acrobatic vocal runs that brought a vintage Nat King Cole hit to life; a sure-handed marimba player who controlled four mallets at once with amazing precision in a classical composition; a dancer whose high-energy leaps and twirls electrified the audience; a riveting dramatic monologue about a woman coming to grips with a crime she just committed; and a compelling portfolio of creative artwork that wowed the panel of judges.

For the record, scholarship amounts ranged from \$1,000 to \$5,000, and those winning the top prize were, in order:

Sarah Gruber of Northeast High School, the aforementioned Valedictorian who won a culinary competition sponsored by the Ryan Wells Foundation (in which the finalists had to use syrup and ricotta cheese); dancer **Brandi Bottger** of Osceola Fundamental High School, who performed a piece entitled *I Surrender*; **Zoe Schwarz** of Gibbs High School, coaxing beautiful music from the marimba on *Etude in C Major, Opus 6 Number 10*; **Eva Campuzano** of Palm Harbor University High School, whose scene came from Pulitzer-winning playwright Beth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart*; **Aaliyah Jackson** of Osceola Fundamental H.S., for her engaging artistic stylings; and **Julia LaPierre** of East Lake High School, for her commanding rendition of the jazz classic *Orange Colored Sky*.



Julia LaPierre



Sarah Gruber

“It was very thrilling,” Gruber said of the Walker’s Rising Stars experience, mingling with other finalists backstage minutes after the show. “I was able to do the production number, and I’m not normally a dancer. It was exciting getting out of my comfort zone.” It has been an enjoyable month in many ways for Gruber, who was recently honored as one of three Valedictorians in the graduating senior class of Take Stock in Children, a Pinellas Education Foundation program that supports low-income students – and she’ll be honored again May 23 at Northeast High’s graduation.

“Every year has been building up, and this year it’s finally paying off,” said Gruber, who will pursue her ambition to become a professional chef next year at the respected culinary arts program of Johnson & Wales University in Miami.

Nearby, LaPierre put Walker’s journey into words. “It was a really great experience,” she said. “I love singing, obviously, and feeling the energy of the crowd. Winning first place is a dream come true, because I’ve worked so hard, so it just feels very rewarding.” The performance was extra special for LaPierre because her mother, Elaine, provided

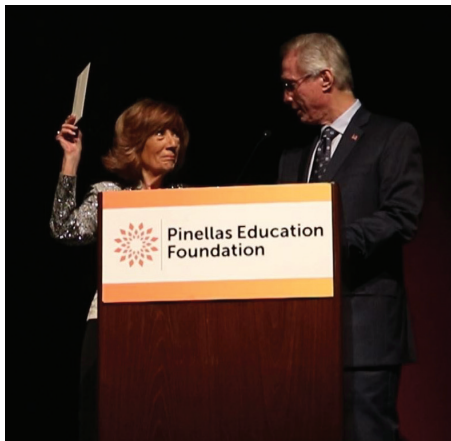
the jazz piano accompaniment. “Ever since I was little, I listened to Ella Fitzgerald, and I became so infatuated with her and her style of singing. So I feel like that really influenced me,” added LaPierre, who will attend Florida State University as a vocal performance major.

Of course, it wasn’t only a night to remember for those awarded first place by the judges – *all* of the finalists earned the right to feel a sense of victory and accomplishment. That group of standouts, each of whom shined in the competition, included, in second and third respectively: Leah Davis (Tarpon Springs) and **Caitlin Keovongsa** (Dixie Hollins) in culinary arts; **Katherine Smith** (Gibbs) and **Madison Swain** (Osceola, and also named Fan Favorite in a three-week Facebook contest preceding the show) in dance; sax players **Jackson Gilliland** (Tarpon Springs) and **Dylan McHann** (Gibbs) in instrumental; **Raeanne Castro** (Gibbs) and **Sarah Duren** (Palm Harbor and last year’s vocal winner); **Lily Annand** (Osceola) and **Leighann Gross** (Gibbs) in visual arts; and **Aleighta Everitt** (Dixie Hollins) and **Chris Loving** (Palm Harbor) in vocals.



Aleighta Everitt

Everitt, who sang an original composition and played acoustic guitar to her own “full band” backing track she created, offered just one of 18 highlights of the night. Her powerful, stirring vocals made her song, *Moments*, memorable. “It’s about conquering fear of speaking, because I’m a pretty shy person,” she explained. “So being able to sing and get my emotions out that way is really empowering to me.”



Joanne and Bob McIntyre prepare to announce the fan favorite winner – Madison Swain

Her song provided additional power to an event that welcomed new presenting sponsors Bob and Joanne McIntyre of DITEK, and longtime supporters of the Pinellas Education Foundation – along with other key sponsors such as the Crown Automotive and Kane’s Furniture.

“This is the best that Pinellas County has to offer,” said McIntyre, a former Foundation board chair and still a board member. “These kids go on to tremendous opportunities in music, theater, the arts and culinary. It’s a wonderful program, and they’re just class kids and excellent students. I’ve always believed in the benefits of youth sports, coaching and teamwork, but it is the same in the arts. We know these students score higher on SATs and all standardized testing, because they’re involved in an artistic passion – and, as a result, they do better in school.”

It’s a passion that propels them in life – just as it did in the stage lights of an amazing night.



Zoe Schwarz



Brandi Bottger



Eva Campuzano

16th Annual Walker's Rising Stars Gallery



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(Left to right): Production number in dress rehearsal; Madison Swain (Osceola); Katherine Smith (Gibbs), Aaliyah Jackson (Osceola); Jackson Gilliland (Tarpon Springs) the Tarpon Springs High School Jazz Ensemble; immediately below, Raeanne Castro (Gibbs); Sarah Duren (Palm Harbor); and, below, Dylan McHann (Gibbs);