

**Pinellas Education
Foundation**



Walker's Rising Stars Shines Online, On Stage In Talent-Packed Production

The collective power of the arts in Pinellas County Schools was on full display the evening of Thursday May 13, touching viewers online and in-person with a varied and remarkable display of talent.

It was the 18th annual Walker's Rising Stars Scholarship Competition. And in true performance tradition, the show went on – creatively blending a virtual format for an audience spanning the county and beyond with a small but enthusiastic crowd in Largo High School's auditorium. Even amid pandemic precautions for social distancing, 25 high school seniors and juniors succeeded in bringing everyone watching close together on this night with the power and grace of their artistry.

Presented by the Pinellas Education Foundation, in partnership with Pinellas County Schools, the show served notice that the arts are not only alive and well in the district but flourishing at national-caliber level. The soaring notes of Gibbs High School's Sydney Hilton to start the evening in a song called *Quiet* loudly proclaimed what a special event this Walker's Rising Stars is – thanks to support of founding donor Dr. Jeffrey Walker, and the generous backing of an array of local sponsors.

"Since the program began, I want to emphasize that over \$800,000 in scholarships have been awarded, so thank you to Dr. Walker for your vision, and the Pinellas Education Foundation to showcase this tremendous talent" said PCS Superintendent Dr. Michael Grego.

"These are just a few examples of the accomplishments of Pinellas County Schools students – both past and present," he added. "And although these students perform in a variety of disciplines, there is one thread that ties all of them together. All of these students put forth the time and the effort to achieve greatness."

Dr. Grego gave special thanks to the teachers who diligently nurture that talent, and anchor a "rich and robust arts program that is the envy of districts across this country." And he underscored the point by sharing "that for the second year in a row, Pinellas County Schools has been named one of the best communities for music education in the United States."

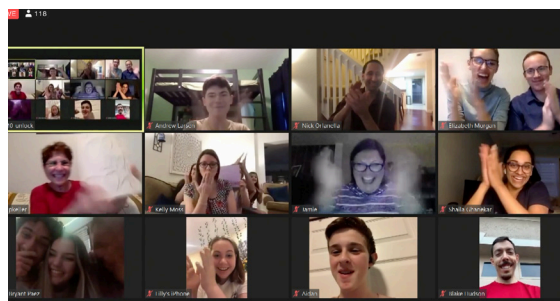
The students' impressive efforts made that case in style, accompanied by the lively emcee work of 10 Tampa Bay reporter



Sydney Hilton of Gibbs High



Samantha Kopec of Tarpon Springs High



Fans of vocalist Christy Do of Palm Harbor University High

Beau Zimmer, himself a product of Pinellas County Schools as a graduate of Lakewood High. The finalists, all scholarship winners even before stepping into the spotlight Thursday, provided a wide range of dazzling taped efforts in the disciplines of culinary arts, dance, instrumentals, theater, visual art, and vocal.

An innovative twist this year allowed the students still to appear live during the show – and even receive virtual cheers and applause from family members, classmates and friends appearing on a big screen in the middle of the stage.

Following the pre-recorded presentations of their performances, visual art or culinary creations, they were interviewed at one side of the stage by recently retired Jeanne Reynolds, who helped to develop the Walker's Rising Stars



Emcee Beau Zimmer and event driving force Jeanne Reynolds thank viewers for watching

program and championed the arts in Pinellas County Schools throughout her career. The interview segments with Reynolds added an engaging extra dimension to the proceedings, as she elicited interesting answers from the finalists – who survived a field of more than 200 students – about what drew them to their disciplines and their dreams for the future.



Jonathan Munoz of Gibbs High

As the show neared an end, Dr. Walker made a point to thank Reynolds for her contribution in starting the program two decades ago. He spoke of the sustaining power of the arts amidst the challenges of the pandemic. And he added his signature upward arm sweep to announce the winners, coupled with his familiar words: *"And now the moment you've all been waiting for ... Walker's Rising Stars!!"*

First place winners in all but the culinary category earned \$3,000 scholarships, \$1,500 for second place, \$1,000 for third and \$500 for fourth. The culinary competition, sponsored by the Ryan Wells Foundation, offered \$1,500 for first, \$1,000 for second and \$750 for third.

"As we've seen tonight, we've got people watching all over this county – and maybe all over this country," Reynolds said. *"And I think we should have everybody stand and give all of these artists a wonderful standing ovation, wherever you are."*

Winners by Category

Dance

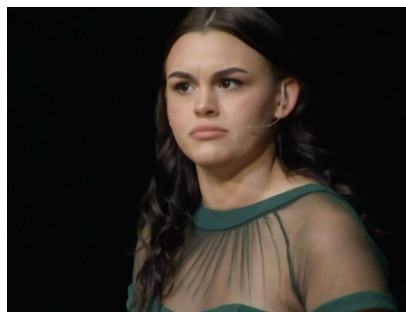
1. Breanna Stevens, Osceola Fundamental High
2. Ashley Kadau, Largo High
3. Lauren Townsend, East Lake High
4. Maria Tsesmelis, Tarpon Springs High

Instrumental

1. Samantha Kopeck, clarinet, Tarpon Springs High
2. Chase Oliveri, clarinet, Tarpon Springs High
3. Jonathan Munoz, tenor sax, Gibbs High
4. (Tie) Amelia Pemberton, violin, Seminole High and Brian Tran, piano, Lakewood High

Theater

1. Lexi Stephens, Palm Harbor University High
2. Darrah Evans, Northeast High
3. Zoei Ortega, Palm Harbor University High
4. Caitlin Rivera, Osceola Fundamental High



Lexi Stephens of Palm Harbor University High

Thank you to our generous sponsors:

Dr. Jeffrey Walker



Special thanks to:

Pinellas Education Foundation | Pinellas County Schools
Multimedia Team | Largo High School | Beau Zimmer |
Jeanne Reynolds | Ajori Spencer | Jonathan Ogle

To learn about sponsoring Walker's Rising Stars,
please contact Vice President of Advancement
Julie Perrelli at 727-588-4816, ext. 2113
or by email at julie.perrelli@pinellaseducation.org

Winners (Cont.)

Vocal

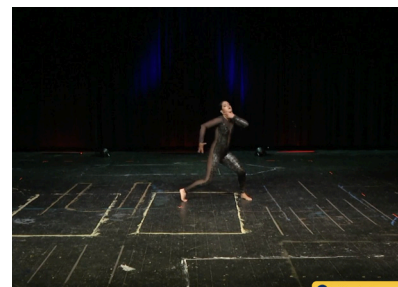
1. Sydney Hilton, Gibbs High
2. Christy Do, Palm Harbor University High
3. Liberty Mack, Osceola Fundamental High
4. Griffin Collins, Tarpon Springs High

Visual

1. Joy Chen, Largo High
2. Jaden Green, Gibbs High
3. Amber Ross, Osceola Fundamental High
4. Luna Garcia, East Lake High

Culinary

1. Sarah Burkart, Tarpon Springs High
2. (Tie) Nicolas Boylan, Tarpon Springs High
and Ayana Drain-Brinson, Clearwater High
3. Devin Payne, Northeast High

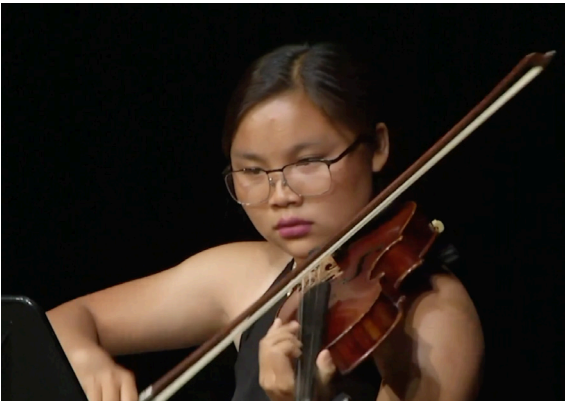


Breanna Stevens of Osceola Fundamental High

Walker's Rising Stars Gallery
(to view the show click [here](#))



Amber Ross, Osceola Fundamental High (above); Christy Do (right), Palm Harbor University High



Amelia Pemberton, Seminole High



Maria Tsesselis, Tarpon Springs High



Ashley Kadau, Largo High



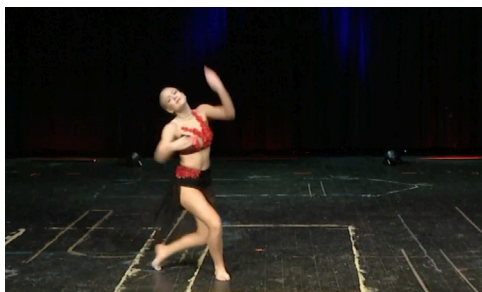
Liberty Mack, Osceola Fundamental High



Joy Chen, Largo High



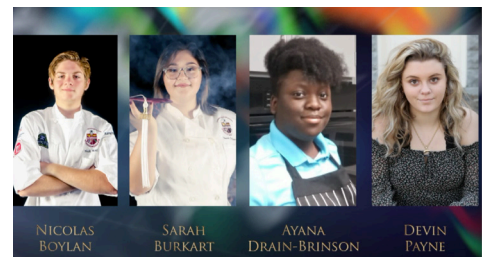
Superintendent Dr. Michael Grego



Lauren Townsend, East Lake High



Luna Garcia, East Lake High



Culinary finalists Nicolas Boylan, Sarah Burkart (both Tarpon Springs High), Ayana Drain-Brinson (Clearwater High) and Devin Payne (Northeast High)