



Press Release

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**The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
announces the**

**Winners of the 2019
VSA Playwright Discovery Competition
Recognizing Excellence in Young Playwrights**

**Six Young Playwrights from Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin
Invited to Participate in Weekend of Pre-Professional Activities at the
Kennedy Center, April 17-19, 2019**

(WASHINGTON)—Six young playwrights from Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin have been selected as the winners of the 2019 VSA Playwright Discovery Competition, a Jean Kennedy Smith Arts and Disability program of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The competition challenges middle-and-high-school aged writers to explore the disability experience through crafting short plays— based on their own experiences and observations, creating fictional characters and settings, or choosing to write metaphorically or abstractly.

The award recipients and winning plays are:

PLAYWRIGHT(S)	PLAY	HOMETOWN
Lindsey M. Drew	<i>Life Coach</i>	Hinesburg, Vermont
Tyler Econa	<i>The Factor</i>	Woodbridge, Virginia
Leah Ican and Candace Todd	<i>Vitamins</i>	Woodbridge, Virginia
Kate Ketelhohn	<i>Liberating Words</i>	Cedarburg, Wisconsin
Noah Messer	<i>Einstein</i>	Austin, Texas

The six winning playwrights of the competition's Senior Division (grades 10–12) will travel to Washington, D.C. to participate in a weekend of pre-professional activities at the Kennedy Center during the annual Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, April 17–19.

In addition, Anja Herrman, the winner in the Primary Division (grades 6–7) is a student from Roosevelt Middle School in River Forest, Illinois. Aspen Whitaker, a student from Valley High School in Louisville, Kentucky is the winner in the Junior Division (grades 8–9).

The young playwrights will engage with seasoned professional playwrights, directors, and actors to refine their scripts and further develop their playwriting skills. Mentors include Curt L. Tofteland, founder of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program; Heather Helinsky, independent dramaturg; and Tim J. Lord, inaugural Apothetae and Lark Playwriting Fellowship for a writer with a disability and was a 2017–2018 Jerome Fellow at the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis. A dynamic acting company including Suzanne Richard, Artistic Director of Open Circle Theatre Company will also work with the playwrights on their plays.

“The arts provide an opportunity to gain different perspectives—whether visually in artwork, on the stage in text and song, or through words on a page. The talent of these high school students and their unique observations on the individual disability experience captured us at the first reading.” Said Betty Siegel, Director of VSA and Accessibility at the Kennedy Center. “Their ability to engage us is a testament to their capacity as young writers and storytellers to teach us about the human experience with humor, empathy and perception. We are thrilled to support their continued creative development.”

2019 VSA Playwright Discovery Competition Winners

Lindsey M. Drew (*Life Coach*) is a senior at Champlain Valley Union High School in Hinesburg, Vermont. Drew escapes to Broadway whenever possible and counts *Hamilton*, *Fun Home*, and *Kinky Boots* as three of her favorite shows. Drew has cerebral palsy and is an advocate for disability rights.

Tyler Econa (*The Factor*) – is a nonbinary writer, poet, and artist whose work has been recognized nationally by Scholastic, Writopia Labs, as well as other regional and local publications and collaborations. Hailing from the D.C. metropolitan area, Econa lives with a learning disability. They will be attending the University of the Arts in Philadelphia this fall to study writing for film and television.

Anja Korovesis Herrman (*It Won't Change Anything, Right?/Primary Division*) is a seventh grader with a physical disability and attends Roosevelt Middle School in River Forest, Illinois. Her interests include advocating for people with disabilities, reading which include books such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and E.B White's *Charlotte's Web* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. Herrman has recently become a member of the national disability rights group ADAPT.

Leah Ican (*Vitamins* – co-writer) –is so grateful to be a senior finalist for VSA! Having spent almost her entire life surrounded by the arts, she enjoys writing plays and has directed two one acts in the past two years. Previously, she wrote one with fellow writer Candace Todd on domestic violence which was showcased at the Virginia Theater Association One Act Competition. She is currently a part of her high schools AP art, creative writing, and theater programs. She will be continuing her education at NVCC for production design in film. Ican lives with Tourette's syndrome.

Kate Ketelhohn (*Liberating Words*) is a sophomore who has a passion for writing and theater. As an infant she contracted a bacterial infection that led to amputations and 49 surgeries. Years spent in recovery gave her ample opportunity to foster her writing skills. She has completed four novels and is in the process of publishing them. She continues to write almost every day and spends most of her free time at First Stage Theater Academy (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) acting, taking classes, interning, and volunteering with the Next Steps program for students on the autism spectrum. In the future Ketelhohn plans to become a doctor helping children with pain management in addition to pursuing theater.

Noah Messer (*Einstein*) is a senior at David Crockett High School in Austin, Texas, and lives with multiple learning disabilities. He has been acting since the sixth grade in plays and musicals including *Emma's Child*, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, and *Shakespeare In Love*. He began writing plays in his sophomore year of high school and instantly fell in love. Next year, he will be attending Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey where he will be majoring in acting and minoring in creative writing.

Candace Todd (*Vitamins* – co-writer) has been instilled with a love of the arts beginning in early childhood. She is especially passionate about music and has been actively involved in the Tri-M Music Honor Society and the Woodbridge Chorale, the blue-ribbon choir at her high school. She is the proud director of The Viketones, her school's award-winning student run a cappella ensemble. Todd and her co-author, Leah Ican, met in first grade and have written two plays together, one of which appeared in the annual Virginia Theater Association's High School Festival in Norfolk, Virginia. Todd plans on continuing her indulgence in the arts after high school despite her aspirations toward a career in statistics.

Aspen Whitaker (*Precious Jewels/Junior Division*) is a student at Valley High School in Louisville, Kentucky. She lives with a vision disability and is passionate about the arts. She has written countless short stories and multiple stage plays. Her theater teacher, Mr. Robert Gose has assisted her tremendously in improving her writing skills.

About VSA

The Kennedy Center has been at the forefront of making the performing arts accessible to persons with disabilities. Serving the international disability and arts community, the Office of VSA and Accessibility, a Jean Kennedy Smith Arts and Disability program, provides opportunities for people with disabilities of all ages across the globe to learn through, participate in, and enjoy the arts. The Office focuses its efforts on cultural access for patrons and visitors with disabilities; arts and special education initiatives; professional development for educators and cultural administrators; and career opportunities in the arts for people with disabilities. For more information, please visit <http://education.kennedy-center.org/education/#Access>.

About Education at the Kennedy Center

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts sets a national standard for arts learning. Working through model programs and a nationwide network of partners, the nation's cultural center harnesses the power of the arts to address education challenges, accelerate best practices, and uplift citizen artists. Across all its programs, the Kennedy Center is committed to increasing accessible, inclusive opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in, learn about, and learn through the arts.

Highlights of the 2018-2019 season include the 50th anniversary of the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, which impacts thousands of college-aged theater students across the country; the expansion of *Ensuring the Arts for Any Given Child* into two new communities; and *Long Way Down*, a Kennedy Center-commissioned work based on the young adult novel of the same name. On September 7, 2019, the Kennedy Center will open the REACH, an immersive arts and learning center with significant space and programming for arts education.

As an essential component of the living memorial to President Kennedy, the Center's Education programs utilize the arts to embrace President Kennedy's ideals of service, justice, freedom, courage, and gratitude. By cultivating the citizen artist in everyone, the Kennedy Center brings the arts and creativity to the center of our lives. For more information, please visit kennedy-center.org/education/.

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For more information, please visit the VSA [website](#).

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