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# Peaking when it comes to speaking

**Southland College Prep students fare well in national tournament**

**By KELLY WHITE**  
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Two Southland College Prep Charter High School graduates who excelled in a recent national speech competition in Dallas were welcomed home in a big way.

A surprise rally was held Thursday at the Richton Park school for 2015 graduates Erik Thomas, 18, of Matteson, and Charnnia Jones, 18, of Richton Park.

Thomas was the national champion in Poetry Reading at the June 19 National Speech and Debate Association national tournament, which drew hundreds of competitors from schools nationwide. He performed "Kong," a poem by Pamela Sneed, and among his awards was a \$400 Hall of Fame Scholarship.

Jones placed third in Prose for her reading of "While the World Watched," by Carolyn Maull McKinstry. She also performed in "The Invisible Soldiers," an original dramatic piece that the Southland speech team staged during a previous IHSA Performance in the Round competition.

"More than 4,000 students from 30 states, two territories and several other countries competed in the national tournament representing 1,200 schools," Southland College Prep Charter High School spokesman Dick Barry said.

"I did my best, and that I captured someone's attention and they learned something ... it makes me excited," Jones said. "I also enjoy putting myself into the characters' shoes and feeling every single emotion at once."

Both Thomas and Jones faced more than 350 competitors in their respective categories.

Earlier this year, each was among 20 finalists from a field of 700 students to compete in the August Wilson Monologue Competition Chicago finals held at the Goodman Theatre.

"Southland's speech program is only four years old, which makes these two national awards all the more amazing," Barry said. "And Erik only joined the speech team in his junior year."

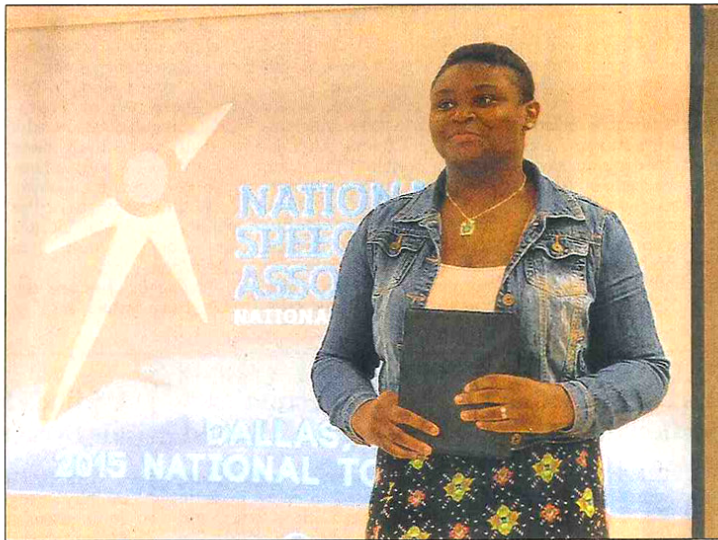
The surprise rally included members of former graduating classes, faculty, staff and community members in attendance to honor the students, and it featured performances by Thomas and Jones.

Richton Park Mayor Rick Reinbold read a letter to Thomas and Jones from U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., in which he stated: "As someone who has spent a lot of time speaking in the public, I understand the importance of strong communication skills. The both of you have proven to be more than just great orators — you have shown tremendous social consciousness, leadership and poise. Your work has undoubtedly inspired and empowered others."



KELLY WHITE/DAILY SOUTHTOWN PHOTOS

Erik Thomas, 18, of Matteson, and Charnnia Jones, 18, of Richton Park, are recognized Thursday at Southland College Prep Charter High School. Thomas, above, placed first in Poetry Reading for his performance of "Kong," a poem by Pamela Sneed, at the National Speech and Debate Tournament on June 19 in Dallas. Jones, below, placed third in Prose for her reading of "While the World Watched," by Carolyn Maull McKinstry.



Southland College Prep director of forensics and theater Cheryl Frazier and speech coach Andrew Malone also were acknowledged for their dedication to the speech team.

An embrace from students brought Frazier to tears.

"For these young people to persevere on through the years on the speech team, it is truly amazing, and it is not the last step but more the first step toward what they want to do for the rest of their lives," she said.

Before joining the Southland speech team, neither Thomas nor Jones had any prior drama experience.

Thomas plans to study theater at the University of Illinois, while Jones is to enter Indiana State University, also as a theater major.

"I joined the speech team my freshman year," Jones said. "I didn't even know what speech consisted of. I just thought we would do a few acting exercises and be done. I didn't expect to actually join a team and compete every Saturday. Once I got fully into it, I loved it."

*Kelly White is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.*