

**NINA MOINI:** Minnesota officially has its first Youth Poet Laureate. Sienna Lee, a high school junior from Moorhead, was chosen for the role after a long selection process. She'll serve a one-year term and become a public ambassador. The Youth Poet Laureate program was established in 2025 by the legislature and is overseen by the Minnesota Humanities Center, along with its national partner, Urban Word. Sienna joins me in the studio now. Thanks for being here, Sienna.

**SIENNA LEE:** Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor.

**NINA MOINI:** It's an honor to have you. Huge congratulations. Where were you? How did you find out that you had been selected for this important role?

**SIENNA LEE:** Oh, they sent me an email saying that I was a finalist originally. And then they hold a virtual award ceremony with the National Youth Poet Laureate finalists, and they saved the state poet laureate for that very end. And Minnesota was the last one. And then the moment they said my name, I just kind of shut my laptop, and I started crying to my family. It was something completely unexpected, and it's one of the most remarkable memories I have this year.

**NINA MOINI:** Aw, that's wonderful. What made you want to apply? What drew you to poetry?

**SIENNA LEE:** I think, for someone like me, I'm not really-- I felt like I had trouble growing up, like expressing myself emotionally. And I felt that poetry was one of the ways where you could be as cryptic as possible, like your symbolisms throughout your poetry, or as transparent. And that drew me in of being able to have a secret language just to myself within my poetry and just be able to express myself without other people actually realizing what I'm trying to say, but just getting my words out and my emotions out. That's what drew me.

**NINA MOINI:** And isn't it cool that even though it's like your secret language, that anybody hearing your words or reading your words can have an experience of that, too, for themselves.

**SIENNA LEE:** Yeah, that's something that's still something I can't wrap my head around, that the fact that my words can actually have an impact on people, and they can relate to the messages that I'm trying to relay. And that's something just truly amazing.

**NINA MOINI:** Do you remember how old you were or when you started first writing poetry? And how do you feel like you've grown?

**SIENNA LEE:** Honestly, I think one of the first moments, and for many youth in the world, it's probably within classrooms, when you have those English writing units. So I think, when I first moved to America when I was seven, we had those poetry units, and I found myself-- because the poetry itself was very simple. You used very minimal words, and you first had a basic rhythm, just making them rhyme. And for me, this was something very accessible for someone who just is in a completely new country when a new language. And I just found myself very accessible cultural point.

**NINA MOINI:** Where did you move from?

**SIENNA LEE:** I moved from Seoul, Korea to Denver, Colorado first in 2016, and then we eventually moved to Minnesota at 2018.

**NINA MOINI:** When I was around 5, I moved from Denmark to California, so I was around a similar age when I moved here. Tell me, if you want, a little bit about how you incorporate your story, your family's journey into your writings.

**SIENNA LEE:** Yeah, I would say a lot of my poetry revolves around my immigration story. And it's just the memories I have were so positive growing up because of my brother. And I feel like a lot of my poetry revolves around my family, especially my brother and the shared experience we had. Because we were only two years apart. So we're essentially just best friends in a new country, just sharing their bonds as they grow up together.

**NINA MOINI:** What are some of the other themes that you find yourself exploring? You're getting close to maybe high school graduation and then taking on the world and whatever your next journey is going to be. What are some of the themes that you're drawing on at this stage in life?

**SIENNA LEE:** Oh, I think definitely something a lot of high schoolers can probably also relate to is pressure. There's just so much pressure on you, not just academically. But also, high school is one of the final moments in your life where you decide on your identity and who you want to be in the future and what you want to do. And these very big questions I just find myself incorporating into my poetry and just it's something I keep thinking about what I'm going to do, and I hope this is something that resonates with a lot of seniors and/or juniors.

**NINA MOINI:** Do you want to share a poem with us?

**SIENNA LEE:** Oh, yes, I actually have an excerpt. I read this at the Minnesota Book Awards. And for a time, I can't read the full thing, but it's just the first meal my brother and I shared together when we first immigrated.

We ate black bean noodles on an upside-down box, the only furniture yet. We pretended it was a table that could hold whole conversations, the kind we'd seen in teledramas. We were seven and nine, slipping into the loud laughs of uncles from a corner store in Korea. We tilted our heads like them, gripped our chopsticks like bottles, let our voices grow careless, as I wondered, would America have uncles too?

And then my brother, the eldest, tried out his new voice, sharpening his R's and L's into the shape of this new country. I watched the moles of his face rise and fall with the chewing, flecked with dottings of black bean sauce that he didn't realize gave away his age. And that's the excerpt.

**NINA MOINI:** [LAUGHS] What does your brother think or what does your family think when they hear of these stories through your eyes, experiences you all shared together?

**SIENNA LEE:** This radio is probably the first time they're hearing about it.

**NINA MOINI:** Oh.

**SIENNA LEE:** Honestly--

**NINA MOINI:** And mom and dad are here watching. Hi.

**SIENNA LEE:** So maybe my brother's listening to this. This is his first time, definitely. But I just owe so much of this experience to him. He was the one who encouraged me. One of his mutuals that he knows in college was Evan Wang, the National Youth Poet Laureate for 2025-2026. And then he was like, this is something that you should do.

And then in 2025, I found the legislator that Minnesota passed, which is something unique to Minnesota. Other state poet laureates, I believe, it isn't something that's directly passed by the government, but in Minnesota it is. And I think that's a huge achievement in celebrating youth in the arts.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah, how do you see your role as an ambassador of the arts? Or what are you hoping to leave behind?

**SIENNA LEE:** I think, overall, I just want to encourage that the youth do have a place and not only in the arts, but in celebrating community and bringing people together through spoken words, like poetry, but also just spoken words in general. I'm in speech, which Minnesota has one of the strongest high school speech programs in the country. And I hope I can bring to attention poetry and youth in fine arts, but also encourage people to seek out more people in Minnesota, more kids in Minnesota who want to share their words.

**NINA MOINI:** So, Sienna, are you thinking about the future and how you want to incorporate poetry into maybe a career one day or how you want to continue to explore it as you explore other things?

**SIENNA LEE:** Well, this is something I've been considering and thinking about a lot in just the past few months. At first, I was so decidedly sure I was going to pursue a STEM path, like pre-med for a lot of students. But the more I realized, the more I'm very leaning into something in government. But this is something that's still up in the air, and we'll see in the next couple of years.

**NINA MOINI:** Absolutely. Well, thank you so much. And congratulations again, Sienna.

**SIENNA LEE:** Thank you so much for having me.

**NINA MOINI:** That was Sienna Lee, Minnesota's first ever Youth Poet Laureate. And by the way, we'll be taking *Minnesota Now* live on the road to Moorhead. You can catch a live recording of our program on May 27 at the Moorhead Public Library at 5:30 in the evening. For more information, go to [mprevents.org](http://mprevents.org).