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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**2016 IWitness Video Challenge award goes to eighth-grade poetry club creators**

Los Angeles, June 30, 2016 -- A trio of eighth-graders from New Jersey who created a poetry group that has enabled students at their school to express their hardships and appreciation for one another has won the 2016 IWitness Video Challenge sponsored by USC Shoah Foundation.

As the first-place winners of this year’s short-video contest – which invites students to make a positive contribution to their communities – Maya Montell, Allison Vandal and Caroline Waters of Readington Middle School in Raritan, N.J. will split $5,000 in scholarship money.

Initiated by USC Shoah Foundation – which collects and uses testimonies of Holocaust and genocide survivors for education and research – the IWitness Video Challenge asks students to submit short videos to show how they were inspired by testimony to make positive choices and create value in their community. The contest is open to middle and high school students across the United States and Canada (except Quebec).

This year’s contest – the third annual – was the first to offer prizes for scholarships and additional money for educators and schools. In all, $10,000 in prizes was awarded courtesy of the Institute’s partner Ford Motor Company, which is sponsoring the event as part of its commitment to innovative educational outreach.

Also helping to make this year’s challenge the most successful to date was the Institute’s partnership with Discovery Education, the leading provider of digital content and professional development for K-12 classrooms, which administered the challenge and helped maximize reach and impact through its deep partnerships with school systems, administrators and educators worldwide.

Inspired by clips of testimony from Holocaust survivors who drew strength from poetry and community during their darkest hours, the students from New Jersey created the Poets Undercover Guild (PUG), encouraging their friends and associates to write each other poems pertaining to the trials of middle-school life.

“The Poets Undercover Guild started because some of our friends were going through rough times,” said Caroline in the group’s video, titled “Community of Poetry.” “Since we all have busy schedules, instead of being able to sit down and talk to them, we had to kind of do it our own way and write things for them.”

The winners’ project included a clip from Holocaust survivor Donia Blumenfeld Clenman, who read from her poem titled “Justice” during her 1995 interview with USC Shoah Foundation, summing up her feelings about the Holocaust during what was the 50th anniversary of the war’s end.

“And the good people of this land … the historians, the judge, the rabbis, the priests, the Jews, the non-Jew, remember each, remember all.”

At Readington Middle School, one of the first recipients of a poem from the group was a sixth-grade girl who was being bullied, said Caroline.

“She felt really alone at that time, and she was just kind of depressed,” Caroline said. “When she read it, she felt empowered, like she wasn’t going to let the bullies tell her what to do.”

In addition to splitting a $5,000 college scholarship, Maya, Allison, and Caroline have secured a $2,500 grant for their school, Readington, to be used for the betterment of the community. Their teacher, Emily Bengels, will receive a $1,000 grant awarded in the form of a check, to be used to promote tolerance and empathy at the school.

A $1,000 scholarship went to the second-place winners, Amanda Gin and Chloe Voss of Rocky Heights Middle School in Highlands Ranch, Colo, who assembled gift bags for 40-plus foster children as part of their project, titled “Never Forgotten.” And a $500 scholarship went to Andrea Chang, who was inspired by testimony to interview elderly people and present their stories for her project, “Tell Me Your Story.”

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