

SHAKER
LIFE

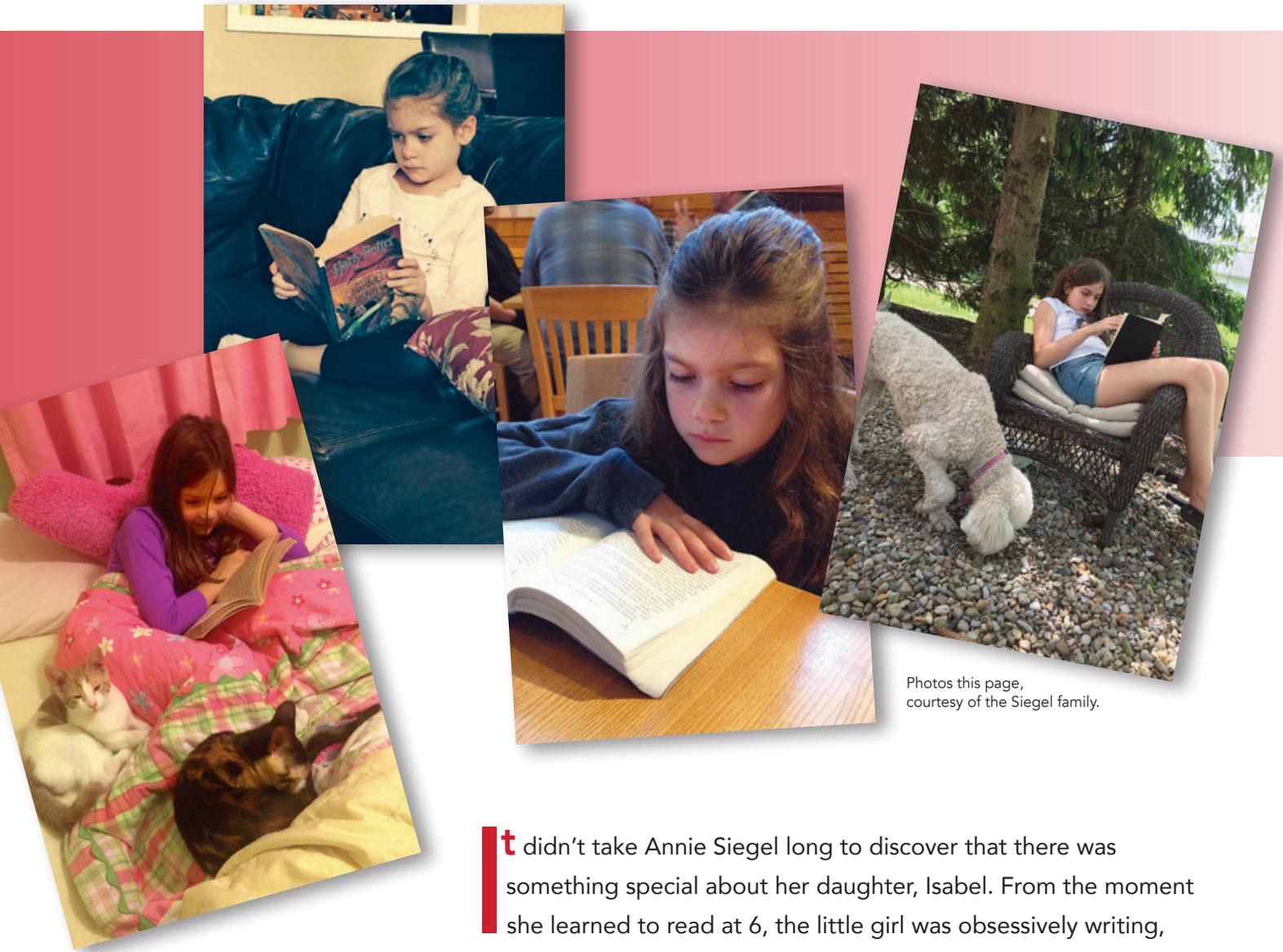
Shaker
Students
Unleash
the
Power
of the
Written
Word

< Isabel Siegel's
top award-winning
short story starts
on page 47

The Power of the Written Word

The long connection between Shaker students and literary ability shows no signs of breaking off any time soon. This year's awards are ample proof.

By Scott Stephens
Photography by Gus Chan



Photos this page, courtesy of the Siegel family.

It didn't take Annie Siegel long to discover that there was something special about her daughter, Isabel. From the moment she learned to read at 6, the little girl was obsessively writing, developing her vivid imagination, and then capturing those flights of fantasy in words.

"On her first day of kindergarten, I brought her teacher a stack of notebooks that Isabel had filled up," Annie recalls. "That's why we bought her a laptop. The notebooks were piling up everywhere."

These days, Annie and her husband, Scott, are rarely surprised what their daughter, now an eighth-grader at Shaker Heights Middle School, can accomplish when she puts pen to paper. This year – her first year in Power of the Pen, a writing club for Ohio seventh- and eighth-graders – Isabel took first place in all three rounds of the state competition and earned three first place titles at the regional level, an accomplishment unprecedented in Power of the Pen competition.



Members of the Shaker Heights Power of the Pen team. Seated, left to right, Isabel Siegel, 8th grade, Asher Voorhees, 9th, Zoe Stiefel, 9th, Anjum Reddy, 9th, Ingrid Holda, 9th, Alexa Carpenter, 8th. Standing, left to right, Erika Pfeiffer, co-advisor, Ezra Ellenbogen, 9th, Neko Tien, 8th, Daniel Carroll, 8th, Sara Lambert, co-advisor.

The Shaker Heights City School District is a charter member of the 35-year-old club, where students compete in a series of district, regional, and state competitions by writing short creative stories using provided prompts. Despite the pandemic eliminating in-person competition, the Shaker Heights Power of the Pen team had a tour de force season in 2021, with numerous students capturing honors at district, regional, and state levels. In addition to Isabel's success, Ingrid Holda, now a ninth-grader, took 11th place overall at the state level out of 237 state-level writers, and won a Director's Choice award for her story "Watch Me Fly."

"There must be something in the water in Shaker," says Erika Pfeiffer, co-advisor of the Shaker team for 14 years. "There's a lot of talent here. These students root for each other. It really is a team."

Co-advisor Sara Lambert agrees. She and Pfeiffer, both language arts teachers at the Middle School, have coached Power of the Pen together for seven years.

"You read the stories and it's jaw dropping," Lambert says. "There is a lot of raw talent. Sometimes they need someone to give them a little prompt to write. We try to push them out of their comfort zone a little bit."

Cardboard Box

By Zoe Stiefel

Once it was mailed
Now it rots in the rain
On the lonely doorstep
Brittle, brown and stained.

Simple, dull, torn,
Not much to see
Yet through the eyes of a child
There's much more it can be

Step inside, climb aboard
And your world will transform.
From imagination and wonder
Endless marvels are born.

It might be a rocket
That blasts to the stars
To meet and greet aliens
That reside on planet Mars

Or perhaps it's a time machine
That takes you back through the past
To when giant lizards roamed Earth
And ruled landscapes vast

Flip it upside, and
It's a cave to explore
With mysteries deep and
Labyrinths galore

Crawl inside with your toys
For hours of play,
Close it up in the dark and
It's a great hideaway

Or grip the flaps tight,
You're the king of the track,
Screeching 'round corners
There's no speed you lack!

Or maybe it's a pirate ship
Sailing open seas,
With the wind in your hair
And a salty sea breeze

It can be a spaceship
That's at your command
You're an astronaut captain
On distant planets you'll land.

With belief, imagination
And creativity,
It can be anything you
Want it to be

But to those careworn adults,
Slaves to their clocks,
In their eyes, it is only
A cardboard box.

*Published in the 2020 Book of Winners,
"The Cardboard Box" earned 2nd place
at the 2020 Power of the Pen
State Competition.*

*The Power of the Pen team
had a tour de force season in 2021,
with numerous students capturing
honors at district, regional,
and state levels.*

Writing Prowess in the District and Beyond

Sabel and her Power of the Pen teammates are the latest and most visible examples of the success Shaker Heights students have enjoyed with the written word. In 2016, two Shaker Heights High School graduates – Wesley Lowery, as a reporter at the Washington Post, and Kathryn Schulz, as a staff writer for the New Yorker – were awarded Pulitzer Prizes. Shaker students regularly excel in statewide and essay and playwriting competitions. The student newspaper, the Shakerite, routinely collects national honors for excellence in journalism. The student literary magazine, Semanteme, has been the springboard for the careers of several professional writers.

This writing prowess is not confined to the public school district. Students in area private and religious schools, such as University School, Laurel School, St. Dominic, and Mandel Jewish Day School, regularly share the winner's circle in competitions with their public school peers. While the popular media likes to define young people by video games and TikTok, the traditional written word is clearly alive and well among young people in Shaker Heights.

"I don't worry a lot about the demise of the written word. Reports of its death are always greatly exaggerated," says critically acclaimed author Celeste Ng, a 1998 Shaker Heights High School graduate and author of the bestselling novel *Little Fires Everywhere*. "I was lucky enough to have many opportunities to write at Shaker, from a teacher encouraging me to write poems way back at Woodbury, to working on Semanteme, to the playwriting class I took at the High School.

"But more important than any particular class or club was the general message that writing was a worthwhile pursuit, and that it was something that was within my reach," Ng adds. "Young people, like everyone else, respond to writing that resonates with them, whether it speaks to the particulars of their lives, issues they care about, or larger questions of the human condition."



"My grandpa would be proud of me, but he would want me to keep going. Won't you join me on the journey?"

Those larger questions are what caught the attention of Thomas Smyers, who graduated from Shaker Heights High School in June and is now a freshman at Harvard University. Last spring, Thomas was awarded a four-year, \$20,000 scholarship as the grand prize winner in the 2021 "Stop the Hate" contest, an initiative of the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage. Additionally, Thomas' high school will receive a \$5,000 anti-bias education grant. Thomas says the premium Shaker Heights Schools placed on the written word encouraged him to enter the contest.

"I think that's really prevalent in Shaker," he said. "They really pushed us to enter the Maltz competition."

The contest celebrates Northeast Ohio students committed to creating a more accepting, inclusive society by standing up and speaking out against bias and bigotry. Thomas focused his essay on his late grandfather, Steven Minter, a Shaker resident and trailblazing African American leader in government and philanthropy, who marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge for voting rights in Selma, Alabama 56 years ago.

Thomas and his grandfather had planned to retrace those steps. But Minter, the former president of the Cleveland Foundation, died unexpectedly in 2019, before he and Thomas could make the trip. Thomas said he put his admiration, and his regret, into words.

"I like to think that even without retracing my grandpa's steps on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, I am walking in his footsteps and helping to bend the arc of this nation toward a more equitable and just future," Thomas wrote. "My grandpa would be proud of me, but he would want me to keep going. Won't you join me on the journey?"

"The Moments That Matter"
earned best of round at the Regional competition in
Hudson as well as the Platinum Pen Award.

The Moments That Matter

By Isabel Siegel

Everywhere surrounding him, there was color. Noise. Energy.

A never-ending flow of life, constantly whirling around them. Everywhere his eyes darted, there was something new to see, something to make his heart leap to his throat. Everywhere he turned, there was a new vibrant, bursting color begging for his attention, a noise beckoning for him to wander near. Large stuffed animals, swinging from a display- there was even his favorite animal, a tiger! A balloon drifting from a child's hand. The thick aroma of salted pretzels wafting through the air. The blaring clatter from a game, giggles and shrieks erupting every time another cup on the display was knocked down by one of the children playing. Yet every time his eyes finally settled on one game, a soft smile twitching upon his lips as he began to inch near it, there was something new screaming for his attention on the other side, until all he could do was simply stand and stare, mouth hanging slightly agape.

"Well..." The nine-year-old's eyes slowly drifted up towards a tall man towering over him, casting a shadow over his small form and clutching his hand. A slight smile had already begun to inch on the man's face, eyes gleaming as he took in the sights around him- yet there was something more in his eyes, almost wary as he gazed at the child below him. As if waiting for something. "What do you think, Jaimie?"

For a moment, Jaimie couldn't seem to form noise, eyes swiveling around him rapidly at the always moving carnival surrounding him. His eyes widened, brown hair plastered to his forehead glinting under the afternoon light. Heart skipping a beat, he stood rigid and still, eyes transfixed now on a stand where kids clutched water guns, frantically aiming them at a little toy swerving around inside. A small gasp escaped from him as the water finally splashed against the toy, cheers erupting as they collected their prize. "I thought you said we were just going to go get dinner." He murmured, suddenly seeming rather flushed.

The man's smile grew, letting out a small, bashful chuckle. "Well, I think this might be a bit more fun than dinner." He squeezed Jaimie's hand, who still didn't move, gazing silently at the crowd surrounding him. "Besides, what's the fun of something if it isn't a surprise?"

His eyes drifted down to Jaimie's small form, frozen as if his feet had been glued to the ground. Suddenly, the man's smile faltered slightly, swallowing as he looked away. His words spilled out before he could stop them, tumbling out in a frenzy with forced, sticky sweet enthusiasm. "There's games, you know. You like games, right? And prizes- we could win a prize if you want! And..."

His words continued to sound around him, slowly blurring to incomprehensible ramblings in Jaimie's mind. The blaring sounds of the crowd seemed to suddenly be growing in volume, ringing deafeningly through his ears as his head began to pound, heat creeping up in his cheeks despite the cooler afternoon breeze. Everyone around him was moving, everyone around him was talking, and he was lost directly in the middle of it. A little girl squealed as she clutched a toy elephant, yanking on her mother's hand and racing towards another attraction. A woman talked hurriedly on the phone, shrill voice ringing out around her. A group of teens broke out into laughter, shoving each other's shoulders as they waited in line. Each and every noise melded into a swirling cacophony of sound, growing louder and louder in his ears with every passing second.

"Alex?"

Somehow, a murmur managed to slip from Jaimie's lips, barely heard amongst the constant chatter. In an instant, Alex's mindless enthusiastic flow of words cut off, like a music track abruptly screeching to a halt. His eyes flickered down to Jaimie, brow furrowing. "Yeah?"

"I don't think I want to play any of the games."

Alex frowned, turning to Jaimie once more- however, in an instant, it was easily replaced by a carefree grin, carefully plastered on his face. As if a light were being switched on and off, without any thought behind it. "Oh- that's ok! We could get a snack, if you want, or I could just buy you one of those prizes..."

“No!”

Suddenly, without warning or before he could even realize it, a yell broke out from Jaimie, high and insistent. He yanked his hand away from Alex's, breaths suddenly beginning to escape shallow and fast. His cheeks flushed, mind whirling as he stumbled away.

“Wait – Jaimie!” Without thinking, eyes suddenly tense and alert, Alex's hand whipped out, latching onto Jaimie's arm. A few passerby had begun to let their eyes linger on the sight, a few murmurs flowing through the crowd. Desperately, he searched the younger boy's eyes, sweat slick on his forehead and eyes wide and pleading.

“Stop it!” Jaimie's voice had begun to rise in pitch now, heart hammering inside his chest. His breaths shallow and rapid, his eyes whirled around, suddenly taking in all the passerby's eyes piercing into him.

“Look, Jaimie, we don't have to do this-”

“You're not my dad!”

Alex froze.

His breathing heavy and rapid, Jaimie slowly turned away, head pounding. Gritting his teeth, he furiously brushed away a few of the bitter, unwilling tears that had pricked towards his eyes, face flushed and heated.

For a moment, Alex didn't say a single word, paralyzed to the spot as he stared below him, letting his hand fall idly to the side, heart slamming in his chest. Suddenly, there was a strange look in his eyes, as if that sweet affront of joy and enthusiasm guarding them before had been dropped. All of a sudden, he just looked completely, and utterly lost. As if wandering through a maze, never sure the right way to turn.

But the unspoken words were there. The words that always seemed to linger between them, no matter what sweet affronts lay at the surface. Even when smiles were forced onto faces, when hands interlocked together and lights flashed and everything around them screamed that it was perfect. There were always those unsaid words, bubbling between them, driving the final barrier. That made Jaimie's hand inch away ever so slightly everytime he neared too close. That made Alex force a brighter smile on his face with every passing second, though his words died in his throat and the meaning beneath it faded. That made them walk a few small inches apart, instead of in a half embrace, or atop his shoulders, like the families surrounding them,

You're not my Dad.

Slowly, his eyes met Jaimie's. Jaded green unwillingly raising to meet soft blue. Two different eyes, two different people, somehow pushed together by fate. A door opening to an adoption center by chance. A click of a computer. Two bright eyes peeking out from a hallway, from all they had ever known, stepping out into something new.

Somehow leading them both here.

Slowly, Alex raised his eyes to meet Jaimie's.

A low, trembling sigh escaped from him. And carefully- tentatively- he began to talk one more time. One last time. This time, however, his words were slow, soft, each one said purposefully. No smiles on his face. No disguises. “Look... I know I'm not your dad. I know I don't know everything.” He paused, uncertainty gazing into Jaimie's ones. When Jaimie didn't say a word, he continued. “I didn't know that you don't like crowds, or if you like carnivals, or what games and snacks you like.” Slowly, he lowered himself to Jaimie's height, carefully staring into the younger boy's eyes. Jaimie didn't look away, heart beginning to slow as he met his adopted father's gaze. “But I'm willing to learn. If you're willing to help.”

For a moment, neither said anything, his words hanging in the air between them. And though the sights and sounds of the carnival still whirled around them, suddenly, it seemed far less loud, far less big, as Jaimie met his eyes.

Then, slowly, a small sentence slipped from Jaimie, tentative and quiet.

“Could we go get dinner now?”

A soft smile formed upon Alex's lips. Carefully, he straightened up, eyes lingering on Jaimie. For a moment, his hand began to move towards the boy's smaller one- but then, with a sheepish smile, he moved it away. Don't overstep it.

“I think that sounds like a great idea.”

Yet as the two slowly began to wander off into the distance, disappearing into the dying afternoon light, the carnival fading to merely a faraway blur behind them, one last thing happened.

Jaimie took Alex's hand.





The cover of Isabel Siegel's collection of short stories, *Stepping Stones*, was illustrated by Sophie Steinweg, an 8th grader at Mandel Jewish Day School. She plans to attend Shaker High School.

Strengthening Academic Achievement

It's no wonder that Shaker and Power of the Pen have been a good fit. The writing competition made its debut at Nordonia Junior High School in 1986 with 170 students from 15 neighboring school districts. That first tournament helped earn recognition for the program's founder, Nordonia teacher Lorraine B. Merrill, who in 1988 was named a Christa McAuliffe Fellow by the U.S. and Ohio departments of education.

The honor resulted in a one-year sabbatical which enabled Merrill to create a state Power of the Pen program. Her work drew additional funding support from the Gund, Knight, and Cleveland foundations. In 1990, Power of the Pen hosted its first state tournament at Denison University. In 2001, an expanded state tournament found a home at the College of Wooster.

Now one of Ohio's largest educational enhancement programs, Power of the Pen embodies Merrill's vision of a program that blends innovative teacher training with interscholastic writing competitions as a means of strengthening academic achievement among middle school students. The program fits neatly into the Shaker Schools' International Baccalaureate learning framework, which emphasizes critical thinking and teamwork.

"I think writing has always been a strength at Shaker," Lambert says. "It's always been a strong suit of our district."

Writing can be a solitary pursuit, which may explain why members of Shaker's Power of the Pen team were largely unperturbed by the isolation of the pandemic. Isabel does much of her writing at her family's quiet dining room table, where a large poster depicting the cover of the Harper Lee classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* looms just outside the room. Light shines through the windows of her bedroom, illuminating piles of books and the beanbag chair she sometimes sits in when she invents her stories. In addition to her parents, Isabel shares the house with her brother Miles, a fifth-grader, and the family's goldendoodle, Chase.

Like many young writers, Isabel's first interest was fantasy. She devoured the Harry Potter novels, reading the J.K. Rowling series three times. Although she has been writing for more than half of her 13 years, Isabel said the competitive element of Power of the Pen – 40 minutes to write a story from a random prompt – has helped her focus and expand her writing.

"It was way different from what I was used to," she says. "In competition you have 40 minutes to write a short story. I think it helped me learn story writing and structure. This year, hopefully, we'll do it in person."

Last June, Isabel celebrated her bat mitzvah with Rabbi Eddie Sukol from The Shul in Pepper Pike. To mark the occasion, she published her own book of short stories, *Stepping Stones*. Original art drawn by her best friend, Sophie Steinweg, graces the cover. Proceeds from donations for the book went to the Actors Fund, a charitable organization that supports Broadway performers who were hard hit during the pandemic. The project melded two of Isabel's greatest loves: writing and musical theater.

For now, Isabel is looking forward to eighth grade and her second year in Power of the Pen. She's also setting her sights on writing a novel. In the forward to *Stepping Stones*, Annie Siegel says she is confident that her daughter can achieve anything she sets her mind to.

"I can't wait to see what your next chapter has in store for you," she told Isabel. **SL**

Scott Stephens is Executive Director of Communications & Engagement for the Shaker Heights City School District.