

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

The Lily McKee High School Fellowship inspires the next generation of Shakespearean scholars and performers.

The Folger's newest crop of distinguished fellows trickled into the Learning Lab on a sunny spring day, chatting among themselves about upcoming presentations and weekend plans—and AP tests. These fellows are not seasoned graduate students but high schoolers, participating in one of the Folger's most remarkable opportunities for young people.

The High School Fellowship Program began in 1981, the brainchild of board member emerita Dr. Louisa Newlin, who also cofounded the Folger Secondary School Shakespeare Festival. When former fellow Lily McKee passed away in 2015, her family endowed the program in her honor.

The fellowship gives students across the DC Metro area the opportunity to engage deeply in research, scholarship, and performance at the Folger over the course of 15 sessions. All fellows get to participate in all three areas, culminating in a monologue presentation and a final project focused on an item from the Folger collection. Fellows receive a stipend of \$1,000, awarded both to recognize their hard work and to prevent any barriers from participation.

From January through May, the 2026 fellows attended a performance of Folger Theatre's *As You Like It* as well as seminars with scholars and performance workshops with American University Professor Emerita Caleen Sinette Jennings. They also enjoyed exploring the Reading Room and discussing with Folger staff members how their career journeys brought them to the library. A highlight was visiting the Conservation Lab and learning from the talented team of conservators.

"It's the best of the Folger because it offers them opportunities that they wouldn't be able to have anywhere else," said Associate Director of Education Liam Dempsey.

"FINDING THEIR PEOPLE"

This year's cohort consists of 25 students from 20 schools in Maryland, Northern Virginia, and Washington, DC—with one student who attends online school while performing with a professional dance company. This year's fellowship program received the most applications since 2002, and the selected class of fellows demonstrate impressive breadth and depth of interest in Shakespeare and scholarship.

Dempsey oversees all aspects of the program from beginning to end, and the aspect he finds most fulfilling is the community that the students create. He said, "I love seeing kids who would never be able to meet before building meaningful bonds through Shakespeare and the humanities, and how Shakespeare can bring people together."

When the fellows had the opportunity to meet acclaimed actor and Director's Resident Adjoa Andoh, MBE, she, too, remarked that it's amazing how the students "find their own people."

Several of the fellows shared this sentiment. Junior Lark J. said, "We're all passionate about Shakespeare and literature as a whole. There have been so many conversations and niche references that we've been able to pick up on. Everybody really wants to be here."

"The value of this program stems from the fact that it unites people from incredibly different backgrounds," said sophomore Nicholas C-K. "This community is a microcosm for basically almost anything, not just Shakespeare." He loved that the fellowship allows conversation about "things you'd normally never be able to discuss."

Junior Sophie Y. added, "Since my school's theatre



program got canceled, I wanted another way to express my love for theatre and the arts with other like-minded people in the DMV.” The McKee Fellowship seemed like the perfect fit.

TAKING THE STAGE

On the day of the final monologue presentations, Professor Jennings guided the students through warmup exercises and encouraged them to take deep breaths. Each brought simple costume pieces or props to represent their characters. Three arrived wearing sparkly tiaras, while others sported backward baseball hats or Hawaiian shirts.

Not all fellows came to the Folger with an interest in acting. Senior MacKenzie H. said, “I had a prior interest in Shakespeare before coming here—from a scholarly standpoint. I don’t have a lot of theatrical experience. . . . But being here at the Folger, a theater and a library, I

realized that working with Shakespeare—theater and academia, it’s all one and the same.”

“I was petrified of having to do acting,” admitted junior Rowan O. “My first time giving a monologue, I almost passed out. But over the course, I became much more comfortable. I’d still much prefer scholarship, but it’s helped me grow and change.” In fact, Rowan ended up being first to share his monologue. When Professor Jennings called his name, he donned a jester hat and a gold mask and jogged to the front of the room.

After all students had performed their monologues to enthusiastic applause and cheers from the other fellows, Dempsey took the stage for a final speech. “You all are going to leave the Folger,” he said, “but I hope the Folger doesn’t leave you. You’ve grown so much as performers, scholars, researchers, readers . . . I hope you continue to learn and Shakespeare is a part of your life forever.”