

CHICAGOLAND EXTRA



The audience applauds Michael Lewis, of Highland Park High School, after he read his poem at the Eco Poetry Slam. Lewis was one of the top finishers in the event. LANE CHRISTIANSEN/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Roses are red, poems are green

... at least they are at the Eco Poetry Slam for teens

By Krystyna Slivinski
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The small band of high school students who competed at the Chicago Botanic Garden's "Eco Poetry Slam" may have been soft voiced at times, but there was no mistaking their "Speak Green" theme.

The nine students from schools across the Chicago area touched on global warming and lamented the destruction of "Mother Earth" as they participated in the recent event, part of an unusual outreach aimed at introducing teens to the wonders of the natural world.

Wheeling High School student Hannah Park, 16,

said it was her first crack at performance art.

The idea is to "express your thoughts and how you feel" about the environment, she said.

The competition was part of the Fairchild Challenge, an idea spearheaded by the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables, Fla.

Organizers found that the garden's mission and message weren't getting through to enough teens.

So they launched a program that was competitive and provided students with a list of different ways to address environmental issues.

"We want to give them ideas on how to make positive changes," said Carl Lewis, the garden's director.

"In addition, we think that by showing kids a program that has a scientific basis and getting them

involved that we can help them toward careers in science."

After hearing about the group's success, the Chicago Botanic Garden decided to start a pilot program in 2003, inviting three high schools in Chicago to take part.

The hope was "to get students involved who wouldn't normally think about the environment or who aren't science minded," said Jennifer Schwarz Ballard, director of the garden's Center for Teaching and Learning.

This year about 50 schools are participating and up to 2,000 students, who compete at different times in 10 events including poetry, music, business and "ecojournalism."

Lane Tech College Prep won last month's poetry slam at the garden.

Other participants included Highland Park, Dun-

dee-Crown and Warren Township high schools.

The school that earns the most points at the end of all the competitions wins a small cash prize.

The top student prize is an Eco-Expedition, a one- or two-week trip offered in partnership with the Earthwatch Institute.

Wheeling High School got involved last year at the urging of science teacher Lisa Del Muro.

Since the challenges overlap several areas of study such as English, arts, music and science, Del Muro says the key is in getting other teachers involved.

This year, she has six students competing.

"I think it's fabulous," said Del Muro, adding that last year one of their students won an Eco-Expedition to Africa — two weeks tracking and tagging zebras.