# Senior’s identity as a writer emerges over time

*DECK: Helena Lee has attended writing summer camps and participated in poetry open mics.*

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## Image: /images/helena.jpg

## Attribution: Helena Lee

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**Caption: Senior Helena Lee recites “3 a.m,” a poem about her auditory hallucination and paranoia while pulling an all nighter, on Nov. 13, 2019 at the Saratoga Library.**

## Linked to spreadsheet? Yes

During the Spring break of her sophomore year, Helena Lee stood in the crowd at Caffe Frascati in San Jose, anxious about the number of adult poetry enthusiasts around her. Her latte trembled slightly in her hand as she practiced her poem, “The City,” about her apprehension of her unknown future.

As Lee stepped up to the stage and began her poem, she heard the chatter quiet down until it was silent in the cafe. The more she recited her poem, the more alive and in touch with her emotions she felt. After the last line, the cafe erupted into applause and shouted words of praise and encouragement.

Because of the crowd’s supportive environment, Helena was happy to have shared her work at the open mic, her first public emergence into the poetry world.

Listening in the audience, Helena empathized with the experiences of the diverse stories at the open mic. She also noticed the powerful poetry reciting and writing techniques the poets practiced to emphasize their ideas.

“When done correctly, repetition can be very powerful,” Helena said. “One performer emphasized the word ‘childish’ by repeating it to express the criticism she received when trying to break out of her comfort zone and just do things for the sake of her enjoyment.”

Helena started her poetry journey in middle school English classes. She felt it was freeing to be unrestrained by grammar rules for capitalization, punctuation and even spelling. To her, writing poetry was all about exploring her feelings.

She writes her poems in the Notes app on her phone, rambling about her emotions or personal hardships in messy, colloquial language before shaping them into a more polished final form.

“I feel like poetry is a way of organizing your thoughts and making sure they're clear while also giving you the liberty to have fun with artistic expression,” Helena said.

The same year she went to the open mic, Helena participated in Poetry Out Loud, a national poetry recitation competition that provides resources for students to study poetry. The experience inspired her own writing as she empathized with the poets she listened to.

The summer after sophomore year, she participated in the program that had the most impact on her writing, Education Unlimited, a camp where students can choose from a wide range of classes from astrophysics to art.

For six weeks at Education Unlimited, Helena practiced creative writing, a topic she grew interested in as she began writing more poetry. At the camp, Helena met writers from all over the world, introducing her to a plethora of new ideas and perspectives.

“I met a girl from Puerto Rico who wrote a very powerful piece using the imagery of her island on fire as a metaphor for the political turmoil taking place in Puerto Rico,” Helena said.

Because classes happened seven days a week, Helena felt that her writing ability greatly improved from the feedback, group discussions and writing workshops.

In her junior year, as an English 11 Honors assignment, Helena submitted a collection of poems and stories to the National Council of Teachers of English contest to answer that year’s prompt “Why I Write.” The collection described different “aha!” moments in stages of her life, from embracing her body to loving the quirks that make up her personality.

“[The poems](https://docs.google.com/document/d/10AZ0DnpopbqQZ749_RDvSVaKbYseIdHlkFEwiemvYG4/edit?usp=sharing) talked about loving and embracing my identity as well as my physical appearance because since there’s nothing I can do to change it, I might as well just love it,” Helena said.

This collection of moments won her one of the three Superior Writing Awards given to Saratoga students that year.

Today, Helena continues to write poetry in her free time and has begun to pen short stories. She is also thinking of writing a book on her Asian American experience in light of the recent racial violence against Asian Americans.

“Writing helps me organize my emotions by creating characters to go through similar experiences that I went through,” Helena said. “Especially during a time as isolating as the pandemic, these characters provided me with a sense of comfort and an outlet for my thoughts and emotions.”