Local youth poetry group competes in Philadelphia

For youth ages 13 to 19, a safe space exists where they are taught the craft of poetry writing from two of Baton Rouge’s most seasoned spoken word poets, eight-time National Poetry Slam team member Donney Rose and the 2013 Individual World Poetry Slam (IWPS) champion Chancellor “xero” Skidmore. Skidmore and Rose work through an arts-based nonprofit called Forward Arts, Inc. Its flagship project, WordPlay is the agency in which the two teach poetry writing and performance workshops. Originally founded in 2005 by Anna West – a Baton Rouge native, then newly returned home from building a nonprofit in Chicago – WordPlay Teen Writing Project began as part of the teen programming service unit at the Big Buddy Program.

In 2011 Skidmore and Rose packed up WordPlay and so it became the first program of Forward Arts. Attempting to continue burning the torch that began with West, the two men worked for nearly three years providing the same in-school residencies, after-school writing workshops and annual teen poetry festival ALL CITY. But unlike financially secured veteran nonprofit agencies, Forward Arts did the work all through contracts and donations while awaiting 501c3 approval from the IRS.

A 501c3 organization is the most common type of nonprofit. This IRS category provides federal income tax exemptions to approved agencies that fulfill purposes such as charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, public safety testing, amateur sports competition, child or animal cruelty prevention.

On the day of their summer camp’s showcase, Rose, who hosted the event announced that Forward Arts had received its IRS approval and could officially begin the search for lasting grants and accept its own donations. Following that joy, Rose and Skidmore will of course, continue the program’s mission of providing workshops, performance spaces and professional development for young people and adults and fostering social transformation through critical engagement and creative practice – all of which happens on a semester basis.

But before the beginning of fall programming, the two veteran poets traveled with five youth poets to Philadelphia for the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Festival (BNV) with Rose acting as mentor and Skidmore as the official coach.

BNV was created by Youth Speaks, Inc. in 1998 after the inaugural Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam in San Francisco – the first poetry slam dedicated to youth in the world. Since that time, BNV has grown to represent youth from all across the United States and several cities and countries from around the world. In fact, this year’s BNV included a team from Cape Town, South Africa.

The five Forward Arts youth, Amber Torrence, age 16 and Jennifer Deschner, age 17 – McKinley High; Antonio Dupre, age 17 and Brittany Marshall, age 17 – Baton Rouge Magnet High; and Antone Leblanc, age 18 – Scotlandville Magnet High, were the 2014 highest scoring individual poets at the ALL CITY Teen Poetry Festival which earned them their spots on the Forward Arts All Star Slam team.

A poetry slam is an Olympic style competition where poets are scored zero to ten using a decimal point by five randomly selected judges. The high and the low scores are thrown out leaving the poet with a possible total of 30. At BNV each team competes at two quarter final bouts with their own original material within a time limit of three minutes, thirty
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The Forward Arts youth began preparation for the big competition in mid May, nearly two weeks after ALL CITY and just less than months before BNV. Committing to a semi-rigorous rehearsal schedule, the young poets were taught the art of revision, crafting of group poems and performance techniques.

“We did inventory of specific types of poems and we were lacking on group poems,” Deschner said. “We got writing prompts to pour ourselves on the page. And then there’s an editor – I really struggled with editing until xero explained to me that it’s not four poems trying to become one voice – it’s four voices trying to become one poem.”

While Deschner admits to struggling as a group poem editor, the young author said she has been writing since before she can remember.

You once asked me why I kept so many secrets,
made the habits of hiding my dark side and shutting you out like
birds’ shrill singing on the wrong side of the bed mornings.
I’ve tried to give you honesty,
but I still have to force myself not to turn too many pages in my song book soul
and skip over songs that are too painful for me to try and sing.
I tried to make rhythms of my flinching when you requested my most haunting tunes,
tried to persuade you I had lovelier lullabies for you to listen to but
you would have none of it.

Excerpt, “Trust Issues” – Jennifer Deschner

But, spoken word, especially slam is still relatively new to her. Deschner read her first poem at Freshhhh Heat Teen Open & Poetry Slam as a means to pay her friend back a loan
or as she jokingly said, by way of blackmail from having owed the money for such a long period of time.

It was in the trickery that Deschner found her love for performing. She then brought her joy back to McKinley, and thus was able to onboard schoolmate Amber Torrence.

“Jennifer is my mentor,” Torrence said. “She told me I was good and not to doubt myself – I’m here because of her. Now I’m in love with poetry and when I feel like I need to say something, I write it.”

Torrence said that while she still gets nervous, she loves performing and being onstage. She shares that love with her teammate Antonio Dupre, who admits before being exposed to slam, he thought poetry was for nerds.

“I feel like poetry is an addiction at this point,” Dupre said.
And he’s since gotten quite creative with his words, even crafting persona pieces.

I dream of being the finger of a hero.
Sometimes I lightly caress the body of a gun
just to have some of the glory it sheds
stick to me.
My owner tells me that one day,
we will be paraded in the streets
for having, holding, and making use of
a gun.
He tells me
that America told him
that heroes kill people.
Every other finger I’ve talked to around here
agrees with me;
a bandolier is quite hip these days.
It’s more functional
AND looks better than spandex.
It’s a must for any DIY heroes.
They don’t come with capes or catchphrases anymore,
but with heavy backpacks and weaponry.
A bullet is the modern man’s superpower.

Excerpt, “The Psychosis of a Hero’s Trigger Finger” – Antonio Dupre

Dupre has also tried his hand at the dreaded group poem editing for a piece with teammate Brittany Marshall, who said 2014 is her first year working on poetry. Marshall and Dupre were also teammates on the Baton Rouge Magnet High slam team at ALL CITY – the team champions of the team/indi competition.

“I’ve gotten way better with using literary devices now,” Marshall said. “Just within a year I’m going to Philadelphia to compete! I want to see if I can make a name for myself.”

9 year old me
thought I could save my mama.
that I could write her addiction away.
10 year old me
told mama that I’d write her letters
to express to her how I felt
mama didn’t remember how to express how she felt
but by the time 11 year old me came through
those letters became prayers to
God
but the prayers became futile
because 12 year old me
wasn’t sure God even existed anymore.
I’m not even sure God exists anymore.

Excerpt, “Mama” – Brittany Marshall and Antonio Dupre

Overall the youth were extremely excited in preparation for BNV and about having a world champion as their coach, even comparing Skidmore to biblical figure Moses.

“It’s somewhat scary to be coached by the WPS champ,” Dupre said. “It’s like I don’t want to show him anything because he’s just the best – like when somebody goes to the top of the mountain and sees that old man with a beard and a stick and it’s like ‘old, wise one’ – he’s like a sage of poetry.”

Deschner didn’t go as far as worshipping Skidmore, but she did acknowledge his immense skill level as a teacher.

“He’s good at not being too pushy when he wants us to push ourselves,” she said. “It can be intimidating but it’s also comforting to know that someone who’s so passionate is on our side to help us grow. He’s so passionate about poetry and he wants to instill that in us.”

Fall programming for Forward Arts will begin in September with in-school residencies and after school writing workshop, Word Crew.
Drum Roll
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Southern receives charter bus

SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY now has its own touring bus. The Office of Student Affairs purchased the bus for $45,000 – it cost $264,000 new – from the Louisiana Property Assistance Agency. The bus has been rebuilt from the windshield to the rear of the vehicle. Among the changes include, new seating, televisions, Wi-Fi access along with […]