

# BROtherly Love

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(<http://digbatonrouge.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/All-Stars.jpg>)

The Forward Arts All Stars and mentors in Philadelphia. (L-R) Donney Rose, Brittany Marshall, Antonio Dupre, Antone Leblanc, Amber Torrence, Jennifer Deschner and Chancellor “xero” Skidmore. Photo by Leslie D. Rose

**By Leslie D. Rose**

Near the Chinatown area of Philadelphia, hundreds of teen voices belted out a variety of identifying team spirited chants as the youth poets prepared for their first competitive day at the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival (BNV), presented by Youth Speaks, held July 16 to 20.

Since 2006 Baton Rouge organization Word Play has selected a BNV team of its highest scoring youths through its annual poetry slam festival – ALL CITY. The 2014 team – coached by Individual World Poetry Slam champion Chancelier “xero” Skidmore – is 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.

The Forward Arts youth began preparation for the big competition in mid May, nearly two weeks after ALL CITY and just less than two 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.

For their first BNV quarter final bout, the All Stars went toe-to-toe with teams from Asheville, North Carolina; Miami; Des Moines and Stockton, Calif. Utilizing the bulk of their man power, the team sent Leblanc to perform his piece “Dear Lexi” – the story of his older sister’s drug addiction. He received a score of 27.6 which jumpstarted the team to the lead spot – only dropping one notch to second after Asheville’s first poem received a 29.3.

In the second round, Marshall took the stage with “Closet Games,” a poem about her *sexuality* and society views. A signature piece for Marshall, it was the poem that landed her a spot on the All Star team, coincidentally, it was also strong enough to land number one placement in the BNV round with a score of 28. For the third round – the lightning round – Deschner scored a 26.2 with her poem “Womanifesto” which wowed the audience with the feminist charged satirical line, addressed to a condom company: “I’m thinking Magnum mace for when a 357 Magnum just doesn’t match your hand bag.” But while the audience loved Deschner’s poem, three other teams scored a few points higher in that round.

In the final round of their first bout, the All Stars sent up a group piece titled “Lie Detector.” The poem includes Deschner, Marshall, Dupre and Torrence. Receiving a score of 28.8, the team left the bout in third place and immediately headed to their second bout with Cape Town, South Africa, Miami, Bay Area and Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

The first poem in the first round had the audience obviously floored by Cape Town’s work. With stand-out lines like “walk like a man even when you’re shattered inside,” “my father never prayed to God because he believed himself to be one” and “I remember him kissing more bottles than he did my mother,” it seemed clear that Baton Rouge would have a tough fight. But in true Southern friendly spirit, the All Stars maintained smiles and continued to put up their best work. Following the Cape Town poem, Deschner scored a 28.3 for her poem, “Rape Game.”

In the second round, Cape Town maintained its lead with a perfect 30, but the audience and team of all women judges appeared to have enjoyed Torrence’s Bonnie Parker-inspired poem “Destiny is a Stalker.” It is an abstract concept that shows Bonnie in a love triangle with Clyde Barrow and her destined fate personified. Walking away from that round with a 25.3, the team sent Dupre up in the lightning round with “That One Guy,” a satirical poverty

poem that at first appears to be about hitting on a woman. He received a 27.9 to Cape Town's second perfect 30. At that point in the day, it was evident that Baton Rouge would not leave bout two in first place. Closing out the bout, they sent up a four-person poem "Turnt" for a 27.2 and the overall fourth place spot.

It was Cape Town who left en route to semi-finals, securing a place on finals stage and even garnering the second place spot to Washington, D.C. – the 2014 BNV champions.

It was the first BNV for all five of the Baton Rouge youth who remained in wonderful spirits throughout the rest of the festival – smiling, laughing and cheering on other poets. For All Star team member LeBlanc – who spent the entire summer away from his team out-of-state – it was an enriching experience to be among his poetic peers.

"Coming to BNV is the most amazing thing I've ever done," Leblanc said. "It's such a great experience to be with these diverse people and all these poets and all this knowledge and all this experience."

Leblanc, who said his favorite part of the festival was seeing how the community of young poets connected with each other, continued to say that he felt like his team did a great job.

"It's not about the points, it's about getting the poetry out," he said. "We got the poetry out and we did it beautifully and that's what it's about."

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