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## Artist & Activist

Poet Donney Rose uses his words to effect social change

BY RUTH LANEY APRIL 23, 2018

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LUCIE MONK CARTER

*Donney Rose, pictured outside his office at Forward Arts, the arts nonprofit fostering youth development and arts education in Baton Rouge.*

Donney Rose has never hesitated to use his voice, even though he prefers not to listen to it himself.

As a spoken-word poet who has participated in poetry slams for over fifteen years, he has often performed his own work, which can be seen in

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“I actually don’t like the sound of my voice,” he said in an interview at his office at Forward Arts, an arts nonprofit fostering youth development and arts education in Baton Rouge. “I don’t really want to hear myself read and enunciate out loud.”

The soft-spoken Rose has a commanding onstage presence, but not a loud one. “Even after all my years of poetry slams, I don’t like to be yelled at from the stage,” he said. “It makes me feel like I want to run out the door.”

A native of Baton Rouge, Rose, 37, has worked full time as a teaching artist and marketing director for Forward Arts for nearly a decade.

Named to the *Business Report’s* Forty under 40

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slam Brave New Voices last year, with Desiree Dallagiacomo as coach.

“Our state struggles with literacy, but six young people from Baton Rouge came in first out of sixty teams,” he said.

A graduate of Scotlandville Magnet High School and Southern University, Rose was influenced by his mother Anna, who taught reading at high schools and middle schools. “I developed an appreciation for reading early on,” he said.

“There were always books in the house— encyclopedias, children’s books. I had a library card and an early introduction to the library. As a child I liked the Berenstain Bears. In my teen

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Also *Ebony* and *Jet*. I had a strong desire to see [African Americans] represented in literature.

“My two older brothers introduced me to new music, rap in particular. In hip hop I saw myself.

The music was originally by young black and brown men. I learned vocabulary words from rap music. It piqued my interest in language.

“In elementary school [at Crestworth], I wrote parody raps. I would remix a popular rap like Snoop Doggy Dogg’s ‘Murder Was the Case.’ I changed it to ‘Chicken Was the Plate’ with Thanksgiving as a backdrop.

“I started writing poetry in the eleventh grade. There was a girl in my class I was interested in. I

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“At Southern there was a poetry open mic every week. I wasn’t an athlete, a Greek, or in the band. I had no defined identity. So I went to the open mic. From there I started doing poetry slams in the community and eventually worked with national slam teams. I ultimately landed a job as a teaching artist.”

[You might also like: [From the Desk of Our New Poet Laureate](#)]

That job, and his community activism, brought him to the attention of Maida Owens, folklife director for the Louisiana Division of the Arts. She nominated Rose for the 2018-19 Citizen Artist Fellow Recognition awarded by the Kennedy Center. The Center recognizes artists

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\$1,000 for professional development. Rose is one of only five artists from throughout the country selected—and the only one from the South.

“I was aware of Donney’s work for several years, but I really noticed him after the shooting of Alton Sterling [in July 2016],” said Owens. “He really stepped up and took a more active role. He helped youth organize a protest rally. I started following him on Facebook. There are times when his anger comes through, but I was really impressed with the way he handled himself, focused on the long-term goal rather than the anger of the moment.”

Rose attended the Kennedy Center Arts Summit

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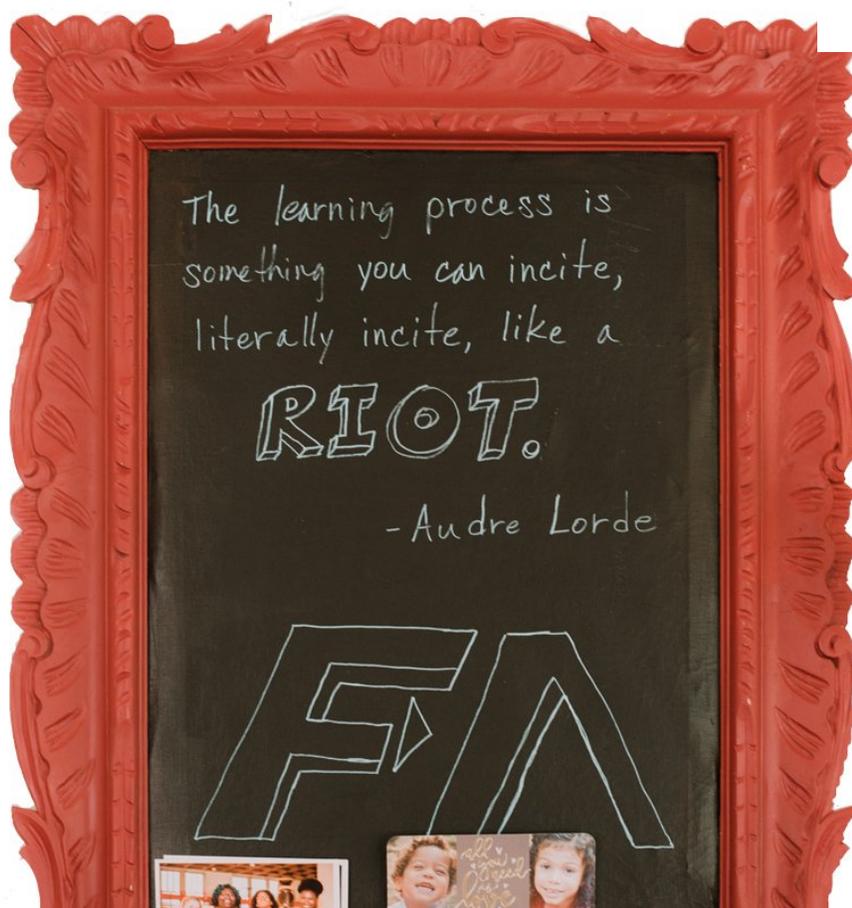
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artistic partners and staff. Next April, he will return to Washington to present a performance piece at the 2019 summit.

“This will bring me increased visibility on the national stage,” said Rose. “I’m looking for the best things I can bring back to Baton Rouge.”



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*Hanging on the wall at the office of Forward Arts, an arts nonprofit fostering youth development and arts education in Baton Rouge.*

The passion in Rose's work is personal as well as political.

As a child, he witnessed the effects of a devastating illness when his mother was diagnosed with the autoimmune disease lupus.

“By the time I was ten, she was no longer teaching. As a teenager, I spent a lot of time taking my mom to doctor visits, because my brothers were out of the house and my dad was working fulltime.

“That kind of responsibility will take away some of your whimsical nature. Having a mother with a debilitating illness, there was always a looming

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As a twenty-year-old college junior, Rose went home from school one April day to find his mother unconscious.

“I went and got my dad, who was outside mowing the lawn. EMS and the coroner came. After that, it was all a blur. It’s a moment that revisits me a lot in my writing.”

IT'S IMPORTANT HOW WE  
USE OUR VOICE. THE VOICE  
IS A POWERFUL THING.

He recalled his mom’s chiding him about spending time at poetry slams instead of church.

“I had stopped going to church. I was discovering a new kind of church in poetry readings. Up until her final days, me and my

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“She sang in the choir and sometimes led solos. After she died, I’d look up at the choir loft for her ghost.

“I’m working on a manuscript about blackness and religion, my mother’s relationship to the church, and not being able to see her any more. She was a pretty important part of my artistic development.”

Rose first connected with his wife Leslie, who is also a writer, over their shared early loss of their mothers.

“I met Leslie in 2006. She had graduated from Xavier and recently moved here from New Orleans. We were both going to Sogo Live, an

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“Then I saw her at the Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam on West Chimes. One night she spoke a poem about her mother, who died in 2001, the same year my mother died. Her mother was born in 1952, the same year my mother was born. After talking about being motherless children, we started hanging out together.

“We had a three-month courtship that was very unorthodox. We spent time together but were fiercely single people. In August 2006, I was like, ‘Hey, can we make this official?’ We got married in 2009. We lit commemorative candles for our mothers at the wedding.”

Five years after they married, both Donney and Leslie were dealing with serious illness. After a

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and impaired mobility, Donney was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2014. Leslie was later diagnosed with fibromyalgia. “It was a pretty strong test of the sickness and health part of the marriage vows,” said Rose.

With a demanding schedule that encompasses travel, teaching, performing, coaching poetry teams, and social activism, Rose has to make allowances for his health.

“I’m trying to squeeze the most out of what I can do physically,” he said. “MS is a relapse-remitting disease. Attacks come in cycles and can be brought on by stress.

“These things take a toll. I try to strike a balance

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That was the summer that Alton Sterling was shot to death by a Baton Rouge police officer while selling CDs in front of a store in North Baton Rouge. Rose has been outspoken about police brutality, and he helped organize a youth rally to protest the shooting.



LUCIE MONK CARTER

*Rose pictured at the Forward Arts office with a certificate of recognition from the City of Baton Rouge, received after the youth team won the 2017 Brave New Voices Festival, and a photograph of the late Kaiya Smith, a former Forward Arts member who passed away in summer 2016.*

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released. It showed the officer loudly cursing and being physically aggressive toward Sterling, who seemed more confused than resistant, before Salamoni shot him six times.

“White people don’t realize that [excessively aggressive policing] has a ripple effect,” said Rose. “We don’t need to fix policing just to stop black people dying. We have to fix policing for everyone. When they act like they are above reproach or above the law it creates a danger for everyone. Hyper-masculine, toxic policing is a danger to everyone. People are out in the streets with the power to make unjust arrests, backed up by empowered institutions and an empowered legal system.

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compromised by it. No matter what your race is,  
your liberties can be compromised.”

To counter the violence, Rose will continue to  
speak out to effect justice and social change.

“It’s important how we use our voice,” he said.

“The voice is a powerful thing.”

[donneyrosepoetry.com](http://donneyrosepoetry.com)

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