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## **HONORS GO TO ARTISTS WHO CAME BACK HOME** *CHOREOGRAPHER AND POET WIN CHARLOTTE STREET AWARD*

**By ROBERT TRUSSELL**  
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Glenn North and Tiffany Sisemore approach art very differently, but they have at least one thing in common: Each of them had to go to the big city and soak up big-city ideas before coming back to make a stand in Kansas City.

North, a poet and spoken-word performer, and Sisemore, a choreographer, are this year's winners of the **Charlotte Street Foundation's** Generative Performing Artist Award. The award brings to each a \$5,000 cash grant and a level of recognition that isn't always so easy to come by.



In recent interviews, each seemed a little awestruck to be selected for the honor by a team of nominators and a panel of judges drawn from artists and administrators in the local community.

"It's definitely validation," North said. "I've been part of the spoken-word community here in Kansas City for about 12 years. I do it because I love it, and it's been an opportunity to work with various community organizations and young people, so to get awarded for something like that is a huge honor. That kind of recognition creates other opportunities."

Sisemore said: "It's amazing. To have the support of the **Charlotte Street Foundation** means so much. Kansas City is really beginning to grow and becoming quite the hub, and to have that stamp of approval from one of the leading and most supportive arts organizations in Kansas City is quite an honor."

For Sisemore, choreography is a form of meditation that leads to a kind of visual poetry in performance.

"Being in the studio and working through (a piece) on my own is very gratifying," she said. "It's almost meditative, and you have those moments of discovery, of 'aha!' But then it's incredibly fulfilling to see it come to full fruition. You can take a dancer who's not that familiar with the

movement, but you can draw it out of them, slowly but surely. To see the entire concept come alive is magical."

North, 43, has a similar feeling when he works with young people in after-school programs or the juvenile detention system.



"It starts with getting students to buy into the belief that they can actually write poems," North said. "Every now and then there might be one or two students who are naturally inclined to write poetry, but most often students shy away from it. But slam poetry reaches young people in a way that traditional poetry doesn't, so I use clips from 'Def Poetry Jam,' the movie 'Slam,' and I was definitely able to use that movie to encourage students to write their own poetry. What's important is not that they write a masterpiece but to come in touch with their own creativity."

North, who was born and raised in Kansas City, said he got it into his head to be a writer when he was just a child.

"I've been writing poetry since I was 8 years old," North said recently. "My grandmother gave me a copy of the poem 'If' by Rudyard Kipling for my eighth birthday, and she challenged me to memorize it and commit to the philosophy in that poem. I really enjoyed knowing that poem, and I would say in the next month I started writing my own poems. I've been writing ever since."

North majored in English at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, but he never graduated. Too much partying, he said. In 1990, he moved to Washington, D.C. There he discovered that poetry could be performed, giving it a kind of power it didn't have on the printed page.

"My friends knew I wrote poetry, but it was really kind of a hobby until I moved to Washington," he said.

One day he saw a notice in the newspaper for a spoken-word event at a club called State of the Union. He checked it out.

"It was electric," North said. "It was like that's what I needed to be doing. So I went home and wrote a poem."

He returned the next week. The crowd was supportive, even when he forgot his own lines and had to grab his notebook. He soon learned that there was a whole spoken-word scene in D.C., but when he moved back to Kansas City four years later, there wasn't much happening. So eventually he and a couple of friends founded Verbal Attack, a series of poetry slams at the Club Mardi Gras.

North finished his undergraduate work at Rockhurst University and is pursuing a master's degree in the University of Missouri-Kansas City Creative Writing Program. These days he runs a regular spoken-word event the third Tuesday of each month at the Blue Room.

North is the education director and poet-in-residence at the American Jazz Museum. His wife, Dione North, teaches in the Kansas City School District.

Sisemore, 32, was born and raised in Sedalia, Mo. She studied dance and performance at the UMKC Conservatory and then moved to New York with her husband, photographer Kevin Sisemore.

"I decided to pursue choreography there," she said. "I worked with some dancers and had some small projects and studio showcases. I danced with a small company for a while. Even if I didn't have a show coming up, I was continually working on new material."

After five years in New York, the Sisemores decided to come back to Kansas City.

"Our decision was about just being ready to grow some roots," she said. "That's kind of our impetus for moving back."

Most recently work by Sisemore and choreographer Jane Gotch was seen in "Jutting and Swerving," a program presented in May by the Urban Culture Project. Before that, she was part of the annual choreography showcase "Modern Night at the Folly."

Sisemore looks across Kansas City's cultural landscape, sees the dynamism and growth in all the art forms, and knows this is where she's supposed to be.

"This is home," she said. "This downtown arts community that's happening has had a large role in determining that this is home for us. ... It is sort of like a little sliver of downtown New York placed in downtown Kansas City."

Last year, the **Charlotte Street Foundation** handed out three awards to performing artists. The fact that only two awards were bestowed this year is simply a reflection of the economic times, said executive director David Hughes. The annual awards for visual artists were announced in February.

"We reduced the number of visual awards by one, and we also reduced the number of generative artist awards by one, really for economic reasons," Hughes said. Hughes added that there would be an as-yet unscheduled public performance spotlighting the talents of North and Sisemore.

"We are in the very beginning stages since the artists have just been selected," he said. "We hope to put together an evening in the fall to showcase these artists and their work. That's an important part of the process."