



Rose, Long Island's first LGBTQ+ poet laureate, is at the front of local marches and on the world stage, fighting for the rights of the community in Africa.

ART meets ADVOCACY

Rita B. Rose's poetry and activism reach back to Stonewall — and into the future

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

Rita “Rusty” Rose was “hanging out” in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village on June 28, 1969, just as the then-17-year-old did every weekend.

“That’s where the action was. I was a singer,” Rose, now 73, recalled. “People were there

with bongos and guitars and I’d go in with my tambourine. All different people would come to listen to me sing and maybe put a penny in my hat. There was a water fountain, and we’d all sing around it. It was wonderful.”

Rose, who identifies as a lesbian, said that’s where she became friends with trans men and women around her age. That night, Rose said, she and

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a drag king headed over to the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on Christopher Street in the Village.

“I don’t think I was even there an hour when the police in plainclothes busted in,” she said, adding there was a lot of confusion, with name-calling back and forth from the police

and the patrons. Because she didn’t have any identification, she tried to run. She was caught, but she said the officer let her go because of her age. The event — the Stonewall Uprising — led to six days of protests and violent clashes with police and is known as a catalyst for the international gay rights movement.

For Rose, the hatred directed at her and her friends from

police officers that June night strengthened her resolve about who she was, she said. Today she is an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community with a youth following. Under the literary name Rita B. Rose she is a recognized international poet and held the title of Long Island’s first LGBTQ+ poet laureate from 2018 to 2024. In

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Rita B. Rose, right, with Christy Henderson-Jenkins, a trans woman who says of Rose: She "has been very much a pioneer for us [trans people]. . . . She figured we had a harder time."

NANCY AMARO

'MOTHER OF STONEWALL'

LGBTQ from E15

2024, she received a proclamation from the Suffolk County Legislature for her poetry and activism. She was also recognized in 2024 and 2025 by FourLeaf Federal Credit Union's annual Best of Long Island contest as the best poet.

ONLY TWO WAYS OUT

But Rose said it wasn't until she was in her 40s in the 1990s that she finally felt confident to speak publicly about her sexuality. This wasn't an unusual decision for someone who was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, first in Brooklyn and then in West Babylon in an Italian, Roman Catholic family. Though she said she knew she was a lesbian from a young age, when she tried to find the word in the dictionary,

She's always concerned about the younger people, the next generation, what's going to happen to them, who's advocating for them."

— Phillip Griffin, chair of Huntington Town's LGBTQ+ Task Force

all she saw "was the word 'homosexual' defined as an aberration and perversion."

"I used to tell myself I don't feel perverted," she said. "I don't know what they're talking about."

When her father confronted her about his suspicions, she said, "He told me, 'There are only two ways you're going to go out of this house: in a box or you're going to marry a man.' At that time, if you were a member of the LGBTQ community your parents could just send you off to an institution."

So after earning a nursing

certificate at Farmingdale State College (then the Agricultural and Technical College at Farmingdale) and then a funeral director degree at St. Joseph's College (now St. Joseph's University), she married a bass player in the early 1970s. They got divorced within a few years.

"The best thing that happened was my daughter," Rose said. "My mom was still paying for my wedding when I was paying for a divorce. I guess it was a steppingstone, but I was out of the house."

While raising her daughter

and pursuing singing opportunities, she worked first as a funeral director, then as a charge nurse in a locked unit at Central Islip Psychiatric Hospital, which closed in 1996.

She said in 1983 that she was attacked by a patient. "I was strangled and beaten and left to die by this guy," she said. She believes she was targeted because he knew she was gay. She said she sustained lifetime injuries, including damage to her vocal cords and legs that "ruined my nursing and my singing careers."

In 2003, she wrote "Asylum:

From the Inside," a fictionalized account of her experience published under the name R.B. Rose.

Rose said that one good thing that came out of her nursing career was being able to secretly help LGBTQ+ patients. "There were patients locked up because they were lesbian and gay. I didn't come out to the patients, but I think I was able to give a lot of them support."

VISIBLE ACTIVISM

Rose's daughter, Melanie Florez-Kratunis, 52, who lives

Winter Creeper

By Rita B. Rose

Winter Creeper you are strong as I am
gay and green nothing stands in your way
you fight in summer for the right to thrive
your legacy clings upon a *stone wall*, unchanged

Gay and green nothing stands in your way
horticultural heretics neglect your imprint
your legacy clings upon a *stone wall*, unchanged
no matter how they try to sever you — you cling

Horticultural heretics neglect your imprint
Emerald Gay Winter Creeper adhere to the wall
no matter how they try to sever you — you cling
forever living and climbing the *stone wall*

Emerald Gay Winter Creeper adhere to the wall
you fight in summer for the right to thrive
forever living and climbing the *stone wall*
Winter Creeper you are as strong as I am

in West Babylon and works for Babylon Town, said her mother never talked about being gay or about being active in the LGBTQ+ community while she was growing up.

“She kept this part of her life fairly private,” Florez-Kratunis said. “She most likely wanted me to form my own opinion and until recent years it wasn’t as acceptable. As a kid I probably wouldn’t have thought anything of it and not paid attention.”

Rose said that she has participated in numerous marches in support of the LGBTQ+ community, including the first Long Island Pride March in Huntington in 1991 and the Transgender Resource Center of Long Island’s Equity March in 2022, for which she was grand marshal. She said it’s important to her to be visible to the younger members of the community. In the 1990s, she started to speak about her experiences at Stonewall at symposia through the Stonewall Veterans Association — now called the Stonewall Rebellion Veterans Association — which is made up of surviving participants of the 1969 uprising.

“That’s when I started to get groupies, young people who started to call me the Mother of Stonewall,” she said.

Phillip Griffin, 29, co-founder and chair of the town of Huntington LGBTQ+ Task Force, said Rose is an important representative for younger generations.

“They need to have people like her to look at as we have limited role models in the community,” he said. “This is a

real down-to-earth person, a real human being who’s not letting any kind of celebrity get to her head. And she’s always concerned about the younger people, the next generation, what’s going to happen to them, who’s advocating for them, who’s at the forefront of it.”

Rose said she still attends meetings for the Stonewall Rebellion Veterans Association. Recently her activism has included working to secure rights for the LGBTQ+ community housed in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees camp in Kenya and South Sudan.

POETRY WITH A PURPOSE

Rose also aims to advocate through her poetry, which she describes as stylistically diverse. She’s a member of several poetry groups, has compiled her poems in three books and performs her work in salons and other venues.

And she’s returned to the topic of Stonewall in several poems, compiling them in “Stonewall’s Legacy: A Poetry Anthology,” to celebrate the 50th anniversary. Rose said that for many years she wouldn’t talk about her experience at Stonewall in part because of the perceived erasure of the key roles that trans women of color like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera played. They were among the people Rose said she became friends with during those days in Washington Square Park.

Rose, who is a lesbian, was just 17 at the time of the Stonewall Inn raid. She said she was with a drag king at the Greenwich Village bar when police arrived.

Christy Henderson-Jenkins, 75, a Black trans woman who now lives in Palmdale, California, said she was in the park with Rose and was one of the underage people at the bar. She said that what struck her about Rose as a teenager was how supportive she was of the trans community.

“Rusty has been very much a pioneer for us and I appreciate her so much,” Henderson-Jenkins said. “She was very much an activist for trans women and trans people. She figured we had a harder time.”

Rose said she wrote the poem “Put the T First” in 2019 “to empower the T community and set the record on who was at the club in the wee hours.”

The call-and-response poem has now been performed across the globe, in churches and at rallies with her per-



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mission, Rose said, including at the 2023 International Transgender Day of

Visibility hosted by the Suffolk County LGBTQ+ advisory board.

Juli Grey-

Owens, an advisory board member and founder and executive director of Gender Equality New York, a nonprofit that advocates for transgender, gender nonbinary and intersex New Yorkers, said that Rose’s poem is “a place where art meets advocacy.”

Grey-Owens, a 72-year-old trans woman, said, “Anytime that there is a positive representation and an opportunity for people to see creative people, which I believe strongly that Rusty is, it’s a positive role model that our community needs.”



Poet Rita B. Rose — who goes by “Rusty” — is a member of the Stonewall Rebellion Veterans Association, which is made up of participants of the 1969 uprising.

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