

Meet Arizona's Creative Excellence Award Honorees

1 message

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Honoring the AZ Creative Excellence Award Nominees and Finalists



Thank you to all of the attendees, nominees, and artists who participated in a day of mutual support, collaboration, and contributions to make the **2026 Arizona Creative Economy Day** a success.

Together, we convened over 200 arts leaders and advocates from across the state, including individuals from 31 communities spanning 22 legislative districts, and over 80 different organizations. We couldn't have done this without the tireless contributions of so many different organizations working together.

We celebrated nominees from across the state whose year-round work strengthens communities both large and small through the arts. These recognitions span the **Arizona Creative Excellence Awards** and the **Governor's Award**. We invite you to join us for the Awards Ceremony on May 8.

Thank you!

Special thanks to our event partner, **Arizona Citizens for the Arts**, and our supporting sponsors, **SRP** and the **Flinn Foundation**.



Watch a Video Recap of the Day

The Bottom Line

Arizona generates over \$15.8 billion in creative economic activity and supports 95,000+ jobs.

We invest pennies per resident.

Advocacy is how we move from 48th in funding to a national leader.

Arizona must secure \$4M–\$5M in ongoing state funding for the Arizona Commission on the Arts to sustain and grow the creative economy.

Why It Matters

Policymakers prioritize jobs, economic growth, and quality of life.

The creative sector delivers all three. It powers small businesses, drives tourism, prepares the workforce, and strengthens community identity.

But without advocacy, these impacts are often overlooked.

What's at Stake

Federal arts funding is secured for FY2026, but Arizona must provide matching funds in FY2027 to access it.

Without state investment, we risk losing critical resources.



The Sector

The creative economy spans artists, designers, performers, culinary professionals, educators, makers, and cultural institutions.

Together, they connect culture, business, and innovation statewide.

The Opportunity

Nationally, the creative economy generates over \$1 trillion annually.

**Arizona has the talent.
Now it needs alignment.**

What's Next

March 31 was a signal.
The sector is organized, engaged, and ready.
Now we keep going.



Arizona Creative Excellence Awards & Governor's Award

Since 1981, the **Governor's Arts Awards** have stood as Arizona's flagship statewide honor for the arts and culture community. On March 31, AZCA announced the finalists and honorees for three prestigious awards, to be presented in a ceremony on the morning of **Friday, May 8**, sponsored by SRP.

Named for **Shelley Cohn, former Executive Director of the Arizona Commission on the Arts, the Shelley Award** honors individuals whose long-standing leadership and public advocacy have advanced Arizona's arts and culture ecosystem in profound and enduring ways.

The 2026 recipient of the Shelley Award honoree is Colleen Jennings-Roggensack, the Vice President for Cultural Affairs at Arizona State University and Executive Director of ASU Gammage.

Named for arts leader and philanthropist **Oonagh Boppart, the Oonagh Award** celebrates individuals or organizations that exemplify the power of innovative collaboration. Four finalists are being recognized, with the official honoree to be announced on May 8. The finalists are:

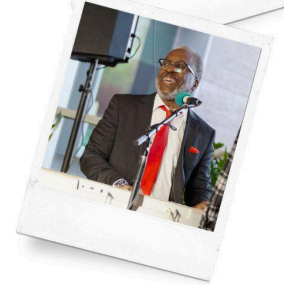
- **Creative Flagstaff (Julie Connick)**
- **Love Where You Live (Thea Wilshire)**
- **Patagonia Creative Arts Association (Cassina Farley)**
- **Warrior Songs (Jason Moon)**

The Governor's Award recognizes an Arizona arts organization demonstrating outstanding cultural leadership and community impact, with a focus on organizations that may be less widely recognized. Nominees are drawn from Arizona Commission on the Arts Creative Capacity grantees, with finalists identified in coordination with the Governor's Office and the final selection made by Governor Katie Hobbs and her staff.

The 2026 Governor's Award will be presented to Theatrikos, a Flagstaff-based theatre with a long-standing commitment to inclusive, community-centered programming and high-quality live performance.

The **Arts Champion Awards** recognize elected officials who demonstrate a strong commitment to advancing Arizona's creative economy through public leadership and support for arts and culture. Selected annually by Arizona Citizens for the Arts in consultation with its board and advocacy partners, the award highlights legislators who understand the role of arts funding in strengthening communities, supporting small businesses, and driving economic growth.

The 2026 Arts Champion Award recipients included Representative **Selena Bliss (District 1)**, Representative **Brian Garcia (District 8)**, Representative **Sarah Liguori (District 5)**, and Senator **T.J. Shope (District 16)**. Each honoree received an original work of art created by an Arizona artist rooted in their district, including John Goodwin, Kristine Kollasch, Sandra Luehrsen, and Ben Roti.



Join us in celebrating these honorees at the Musical Instrument Museum in north Phoenix.

Friday, May 8
Musical Instrument Museum (MIM)
4725 E Mayo Blvd
Phoenix, Arizona 85050
9 AM

Register Today



Honoring the AZ Creative Excellence Award Nominees and Finalists

Oonagh Award Nominees

Named for arts leader and philanthropist **Oonagh Boppart**, the **Oonagh Award** celebrates individuals or organizations that exemplify **the power of innovative collaboration**.

Honorees bring together artistic disciplines, community partners, and cross-sector collaborators to create work that has a meaningful, lasting impact.

Inspired by Oonagh's legacy of convening leaders and fostering connection, this award recognizes creative partnerships that build stronger, more interconnected cultural communities across Arizona.



Gary Aurebach – We Walk in Beauty — Tucson, AZ

Gary Aurebach's photography project We Walk in Beauty documents Native American communities through a long-term artistic and cultural collaboration. The work brings visibility to Indigenous stories and is expanding into a documentary to further share these perspectives.

Balkan Community Culture and Heritage Organization (BCCHO) — Phoenix, AZ

BCCHO connects Arizona's Balkan communities through cultural programming, performance, and education. Their work preserves heritage while building cross-cultural understanding in the Phoenix

area.

Lisa Bernal Brethour — Tempe, AZ

Lisa Bernal Brethour led a major public art collaboration as part of the Perry Park redevelopment in Phoenix, working across city departments and community stakeholders. Her work helped transform the park into a safer, more welcoming space while setting new standards for integrating artists into civic projects.

Sydney Bethel Price – Town of Gilbert — Gilbert, AZ

Sydney Bethel Price has helped shape Gilbert's Heritage District through a collaborative model that integrates public art into economic development. Her work brings together artists, businesses, and planners to create a vibrant and culturally grounded downtown.

Julia Chacon – Spanish Arts — Phoenix, AZ

Julia Chacon has built a decade-long collaboration with Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts to present flamenco and culturally rooted performances. Her work expands opportunities for Arizona artists while strengthening connections to international artistic traditions.

Kema Charles – Lights Camera Discover — Tempe, AZ

Kema Charles leads Lights Camera Discover, a collaborative network that connects artists, educators, and industry professionals to support youth through digital arts. The program builds creative skills, confidence, and career pathways for young people across Arizona.

Julie Comnick – Creative Flagstaff — Flagstaff, AZ - FINALIST

Julie Comnick curates interdisciplinary collaborations that bring together artists, scientists, and communities to explore environmental issues. Projects like Parched translate complex topics such as water scarcity into accessible, engaging public experiences.

Rosemarie Dombrowski – Revisionary Arts — Scottsdale, AZ

Rosemarie Dombrowski leads Revisionary Arts, a nonprofit that partners with healthcare, veteran, and community organizations to deliver poetry-based wellness programs. Her work uses creative practice to support healing, connection, and mental health.

Cassina Farley – Patagonia Creative Arts Association — Patagonia, AZ - FINALIST

Cassina Farley supports a long-standing rural arts collaboration that connects artists, schools, and community organizations in Patagonia. The Creative Arts Center provides accessible programming and serves as a cultural hub for the region.

Jenni Feidler-Aguilar – Gilbert Elementary Kindness & Service Club — Gilbert, AZ

Jenni Feidler-Aguilar leads a student-driven collaboration that uses art to promote kindness and community connection. Through partnerships with the Town of Gilbert, students' creative work is shared publicly, fostering a culture of service and positivity.

Adriana Gallego – Arts Foundation for Tucson and Southern Arizona — Tucson, AZ

Adriana Gallego has led cross-sector collaborations through initiatives like SaludArte, connecting artists, public health professionals, and community partners. Her work integrates arts and culture into systems like healthcare to improve access, trust, and community well-being.

Margaret Hangan – Creative Flagstaff & Coconino Center of the Arts — Williams, AZ

Margaret Hangan has supported collaborative arts infrastructure in Northern Arizona through leadership with Creative Flagstaff and the Flagstaff Arts Council. Her work strengthens connections between artists, organizations, and community partners across the region.

Jo Henken – Casa Grande Arts Commission — Casa Grande, AZ

Jo Henken has helped advance community-based arts initiatives through the Casa Grande Arts Commission. Her work brings together local government, artists, and residents to expand access to arts and cultural programming.

Maxine Krasnow – Tucson Clay Co-op — Tucson, AZ

Maxine Krasnow supports a collaborative ceramics community through the Tucson Clay Co-op. The organization provides shared studio space, education, and resources for artists at all levels to create

and connect.

Charles Lucking – ASU Herberger Institute / Mesh Labs — Phoenix, AZ

Charles Lucking contributes to interdisciplinary collaborations at Arizona State University that connect art, design, technology, and research. His work supports innovative, cross-sector creative practices that prepare students for the evolving creative economy.

Beth Maloney – Act One — Phoenix, AZ

Beth Maloney leads Act One in expanding equitable access to arts education for students across Arizona. Through initiatives like Arts Immersion™, she has built collaborative partnerships with schools, universities, and cultural organizations to deliver innovative, statewide arts experiences.

Joseph Miranda – Morley Arts District — Nogales, AZ

Joseph Miranda is helping shape the Morley Arts District as a cross-border cultural initiative in Nogales. His work brings together artists, local businesses, and community partners to activate space and strengthen regional identity.

Srimathy Mohan – Silambam Phoenix — Phoenix, AZ

Srimathy Mohan leads Silambam Phoenix, connecting traditional South Asian martial arts with cultural education and performance. Her work builds community through shared cultural practice and intergenerational learning.

Carlos Montufar – Phoenix World Arts Collective — Phoenix, AZ

Carlos Montufar co-leads the Phoenix World Arts Collective, which brings together artists from diverse cultural backgrounds to collaborate and present work. The collective fosters cross-cultural exchange and expands access to global artistic traditions.

Jason Moon – Warrior Songs — Payson, AZ - FINALIST

Jason Moon leads Warrior Songs, a national nonprofit that connects veterans through songwriting and music. The program builds community, supports healing, and amplifies the voices of veterans through collaborative creative work.

Winifred Muench – Sedona Ballet — Sedona, AZ

Winifred Muench leads Sedona Ballet, creating opportunities for dancers, students, and community members to engage with classical and contemporary dance. Her work builds connections between education, performance, and community participation.

Victor Navarro – Artist — Tucson, AZ

Victor Navarro is a Tucson-based artist whose work engages community, identity, and place. Through collaborations and public-facing projects, he contributes to dialogue and creative expression in Southern Arizona.

Francisca Nava – Phoenix World Arts Collective — Phoenix, AZ

Francisca Nava is a leader within the Phoenix World Arts Collective, supporting collaborative performances and cultural programming. Her work helps connect artists and audiences across cultures and disciplines.

Stephen Paul – Whiskey Del Bac / Tucson City of Gastronomy — Tucson, AZ

Stephen Paul connects culinary arts, agriculture, and cultural identity through his work with Whiskey Del Bac and Tucson's UNESCO City of Gastronomy designation. His collaborations highlight local ingredients and traditions while supporting Arizona's creative economy.

Matt Sandoval – Art Heals Arizona (formerly Free Arts) — Phoenix, AZ

Matt Sandoval leads Art Heals Arizona, which connects artists, volunteers, and partner organizations to support youth impacted by trauma. The program uses creative expression to build resilience, connection, and healing.

Liam Westra – BNSC News Group LLC — Mesa, AZ

Liam Westra leads a media platform that connects communities through storytelling and local news coverage. His work supports visibility and engagement across Arizona's creative and cultural sectors.

Thea Wilshire – Love Where You Live — Globe, AZ - FINALIST

Thea Wilshire leads community-driven initiatives in Globe that use art and placemaking to strengthen local identity. Her work brings together residents, artists, and partners to activate spaces and foster pride in place.



Shelley Award Nominees

The **Shelley Award** recognizes individuals whose long-standing leadership and public advocacy have advanced Arizona's arts and culture ecosystem in profound and enduring ways.

Named for Shelley Cohn, former Executive Director of the Arizona Commission on the Arts, the award honors those who have shaped public policy, sustained cultural heritage, engaged communities, and left a transformative imprint on the creative economy.

It is one of Arizona's highest honors for lifetime service to the arts.

**Jessica Andrews – Arizona Theatre Company — Tucson, AZ**

Stabilized Arizona Theatre Company through executive leadership and fundraising, ensuring the continuity of professional theatre in Arizona.

Rod Ambrose – Talking Drum Performance Studio Network — Phoenix, AZ

A master storyteller and cultural educator rooted in the West African griot tradition, bringing oral history, performance, and civic dialogue to communities across Arizona.

Patricia Bjorhovde – Tucson Symphony Orchestra; True Concord — Tucson, AZ

Strengthened Tucson's performing arts sector through board leadership and philanthropy, expanding visibility and support for music institutions.

Betsy Bolding – Multiple organizations — Tucson, AZ

Supported Tucson's arts sector through decades of board leadership, sustaining cultural institutions and strengthening community-based organizations.

Chris Camacho – Axon; Greater Phoenix Economic Council — Phoenix, AZ

Elevated arts and culture within economic development, connecting artists, businesses, and civic institutions while advancing public art and creative visibility.

Jose Cardenas – ASU; Xico; CALA Alliance — Chandler, AZ

Advanced Arizona's cultural visibility through nonprofit leadership and public media, highlighting artists and cultural issues statewide.

Karen Christensen – NEA; Tucson arts organizations — Tucson, AZ

Strengthened arts policy and funding systems at national and local levels, supporting institutions across Southern Arizona.

Senator Steve Farley – Artist; Arizona State Legislature (former) — Tucson, AZ

Contributed as both a public artist and policymaker, advancing community-based art and arts funding initiatives.

Adam Goodman – Goodmans Interior Structures; Phoenix Symphony — Phoenix, AZ

Supported Arizona's arts ecosystem through Symphony leadership and business-driven investment in artists.

Francisco Landin – Southern Arizona Film Society — Tucson, AZ

Built a film ecosystem through education, mentorship, and binational programming, expanding access for underserved communities.

Kimber Lanning – Local First Arizona; Stinkweeds; Modified Arts — Phoenix, AZ

Connected arts, entrepreneurship, and community development, supporting locally rooted creative economies statewide.

Michelle Mac Lennan – Chandler Center for the Arts — Chandler, AZ

Transformed the Chandler Center into a regional cultural hub, expanding programming, facilities, and access.

Nancy March – Multiple organizations — Tucson, AZ

Strengthened Southern Arizona's arts sector through long-term board leadership and governance.

Clint Mabie – Community Foundation for Southern Arizona (former) — Tucson, AZ

Expanded nonprofit and cultural infrastructure through grantmaking, collaboration, and long-term support for arts organizations.

Debi Chess Mabie – Arts Foundation / Dunbar Pavilion — Tucson, AZ

Supported cultural development while helping preserve and activate the Dunbar Pavilion as a significant African American cultural site.

Laurie McKenna – Central School Project — Bisbee, AZ

Grew a rural arts organization into a vibrant community hub supporting artists, youth, and regional partnerships.

Martin Moreno – Las Artes de Maricopa County — Phoenix, AZ

Connected public art, education, and workforce development through youth-centered mural programs

Lynn Monson – Arizona Dance Education Organization — Chandler, AZ

Expanded dance education statewide, shaping policy and supporting educators.

Taylor Moschetti – New Pathways for Youth — Phoenix, AZ

Advanced youth development through arts-based mentorship, linking creative expression with mental health and support.

Carlos Montufar – Phoenix World Arts Collective — Phoenix, AZ

Co-leads a collective that fosters cross-cultural exchange and expands access to global artistic traditions.

Victor Navarro-Sandoval – Artist — Tucson, AZ

Creates work centered on identity, culture, and community, contributing to dialogue in Southern Arizona.

Janet Jones – Yuma Orchestra Association — Yuma, AZ

Led the Yuma Orchestra for decades, building strong music programs rooted in performance and education.

Colleen Jennings-Roggensack – ASU Gammage — Tempe, AZ - RECIPIENT

Transformed ASU Gammage into a nationally recognized presenter with deep community engagement.

Janice Klein – Museum Association of Arizona — Tempe, AZ

Strengthened Arizona's museum sector through statewide leadership, training, and professional network development.

Maxine Krasnow – Tucson Clay Co-op and CAUSE — Tucson, AZ

Built accessible ceramics programs, providing affordable studio space and free classes for underserved communities.

Alan Petersen – Museum of Northern Arizona — Flagstaff, AZ

Supported preservation and interpretation of Northern Arizona's heritage through research, education, and public engagement.

Linda “Mac” Perlich – Act One — Phoenix, AZ

Founded Act One, connecting hundreds of thousands of Title I students to arts experiences across Arizona.

Alfred Quiroz – University of Arizona — Tucson, AZ

An artist and educator whose work explores cultural identity and has shaped generations of artists.

Julie Sasse – Tucson Museum of Art — Tucson, AZ

Advanced curatorial leadership and contemporary art programming, supporting artists and public engagement.

M. Jenea Sanchez – Border Arts Corridor; Cochise College — Douglas, AZ

Supports arts access in rural and border communities through work exploring identity and cultural narratives.

Hirotsune Tashima – Pima Arts — Tucson, AZ

Contributes to ceramics education and community-based creative development.

Laura Thurbon – Harvest Compassion Center — Phoenix, AZ

Supports community well-being through nonprofit leadership, connecting families, volunteers, and resources.

Laura Tohe – ASU; Arizona Poet Laureate — Navajo Nation, AZ

A poet and educator preserving Diné language and culture through writing and teaching.

Barbea Williams – University of Arizona — Tucson, AZ

Advances dance through performance, education, and community engagement.

Cathy Weiss – Del E. Webb Center (former) — Wickenburg, AZ

Expanded access to high-quality performing arts in rural and regional communities.

Ofelia Zepeda – University of Arizona; AILDI — Tohono O'odham Nation, AZ

A poet, linguist, and educator preserving Tohono O'odham language and culture.



Arts Champion Award Recipients

The **Arts Champion Award** recognizes elected officials whose leadership and advocacy have advanced Arizona's creative economy through public investment in arts and culture. Presented by Arizona Citizens for the Arts, the award honors legislators who understand the role of the arts in strengthening communities, supporting small businesses, and driving economic growth. It reflects a shared commitment to ensuring that creativity remains an essential part of Arizona's future.

Representative Selena Bliss (District 1)

Representative Selena Bliss has demonstrated strong leadership in supporting community-based solutions that strengthen Arizona's local economies and quality of life. She recognizes the role of arts and culture in workforce development, tourism, and community identity. During the 2025 session, she played a key role in defending and preserving the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

Representative Brian Garcia (District 8)

Representative Brian Garcia has been a leading voice for inclusive access to education, opportunity, and community resources. His support for arts and culture reflects a commitment to strengthening the systems that help communities thrive. He has consistently advanced efforts to restore and sustain funding for the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

Representative Sarah Liguori (District 5)

Representative Sarah Liguori has championed policies that expand access to opportunity and strengthen community systems across Arizona. Her leadership reflects an understanding that arts and culture contribute to both economic vitality and social connection. She has been a strong advocate for prioritizing funding for the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

Senator T.J. Shope (District 16)

Senator T.J. Shope has demonstrated consistent leadership in supporting Arizona's creative economy, recognizing the role of arts and culture in strengthening rural and regional communities. His work reflects a broader commitment to economic development and community identity. During the 2025 legislative session, he was instrumental in securing funding for the Arizona Commission on the Arts.



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