



RHODE ISLAND  
COUNCIL FOR THE  
HUMANITIES

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**RI Council for the Humanities Honors Community Leaders and Innovators**

**Providence, RI** – The Rhode Island Council for the Humanities will honor **Morris Nathanson**, interior designer, artist, and civic visionary, **Holly Ewald**, founder of the Urban Pond Procession, **Vartan Gregorian Elementary School PTO's I WAS THERE Project**, and **John McNiff**, Park Ranger at Roger Williams National Memorial, at the **2014 Celebration of the Humanities**. The Celebration will be held on Thursday, October 9, 2014 from 6:00-8:00PM at the Biltmore Hotel Grand Ballroom in Providence.

This occasion brings together hundreds of community and business leaders, government officials, scholars, artists, and Rhode Islanders to raise funds to support the public humanities including culture, history, heritage, and civic education in our state. Four distinguished awards will be presented: the Lifetime Achievement in the Humanities Award, the Tom Roberts Prize for Creative Achievement in the Humanities, the Innovation in the Humanities Award, and the Public Humanities Scholar Award.

*Lifetime Achievement in the Humanities Award*

The Lifetime Achievement Award celebrates an individual or group whose career achievements demonstrate humanities excellence, reflect the Council's mission and core values, and enrich public life in Rhode Island. This year, the award celebrates **Morris Nathanson** for his deep engagement and commitment to arts, culture, and historic preservation in his hometown of Pawtucket. Having lived his life on the international stage as a theatrical set designer and creator of award-winning restaurants and hospitality venues, Nathanson returned to his roots in Pawtucket, purchasing and renovating the historic, but decaying Rhode Island Cardboard Manufacturing complex for his design firm and a community of live/work artist lofts. Through Nathanson's board service, advocacy, and community leadership, he has been a passionate promoter of many important civic initiatives that have enriched Pawtucket as a dynamic place to live and work.

*Tom Roberts Prize for Creative Achievement in the Humanities*

The Tom Roberts Prize celebrates creativity in topics, disciplines, and formats that extend the field of the humanities. This year, the Prize honors **Holly Ewald** who was selected for creating and expanding the **Urban Pond Procession**, which engages the community in promoting the health of urban ponds through creative workshops on environmental awareness and advocacy. By bridging the humanities, arts, education, and public health, Ewald has created a sense of

place around Mashapaug Pond and brought it to the forefront of community concern, identity, and celebration.

#### *Innovation in the Humanities Award*

The Innovation Award recognizes the innovative implementation of the humanities within an organization to achieve a specific goal. In its inaugural year, the Award is presented to **Vartan Gregorian Elementary School PTO's I WAS THERE Project** for its cross-disciplinary approach to engaging students in learning about the history and life of their school, the Fox Point community, and the natural environment that surrounds them. This powerful program provides an opportunity for kids to learn from people in their community who have played a role in making history and engage with resident scholars and artists to create unique exhibits, salons, and works that examine how the neighborhood has progressed through time. Through history and the humanities, this program fosters and achieves a greater sense of community in the Fox Point neighborhood, and cultivates community-minded leaders of tomorrow.

#### *Public Humanities Scholar Award*

The Scholar Award recognizes outstanding public humanities work in teaching and scholarship that advances the civic and cultural life of Rhode Island. In its inaugural year, the Award honors **John McNiff**, Park Ranger at **Roger Williams National Memorial**, for the passion and depth he brings as an ambassador of Rhode Island's history. In his 15 years as a Park Ranger, McNiff has presented countless educational programs, lectures, and presentations that have inspired students, seniors, community members, and visitors to explore Rhode Island's unique history.

#### *About the Celebration of the Humanities*

The Celebration features hors d'oeuvres, an open wine bar provided by Campus Fine Wines, live and silent auctions featuring unique humanities experiences, and the award presentation. The event is open to the public; reservations are \$100 per person (\$35 for students), and can be made at <http://celebratehumanities.eventbrite.com>. Opportunities for sponsorships are available now. For more information about sponsorships, please call Carole Ann Penney at 401-273-2250 or e-mail [caroleann@rihumanities.org](mailto:caroleann@rihumanities.org).

#### *About the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities*

Founded in 1973, the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities is an independent, non-profit state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Sharing with the NEH the belief that "democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens," the Council invests in individuals and organizations—from scholars, filmmakers, writers, and oral historians to libraries, museums, historical societies, and community organizations—that engage Rhode Islanders in the intellectual and cultural life of the state. Since 1973, the Council has provided over \$7 million in grants to support more than 550 organizations and individuals throughout the state of Rhode Island.

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Biographies of awardees are included below and project photos are attached. For more information, contact Adrian Moore at [adrian@rihumanities.org](mailto:adrian@rihumanities.org) or (401) 273-2250 x204.

## **Awardee Biographies:**

**Morris Nathanson** was born in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and has lived his life on the international stage as a theatrical set designer and creator of award-winning restaurants and hospitality venues. Having traveled widely and with offices in New York, Boston and Providence, Morris returned to his roots in Pawtucket in 1986, purchasing the historic, but decaying Rhode Island Cardboard Manufacturing complex. Over the last 18 years he and his wife, Phyllis Van Orden Nathanson, have renovated the mill buildings into offices for his design firm and a community of live/work artist lofts and renaming them Blackstone Studios. Nathanson is deeply committed to civic initiatives in Pawtucket and Providence and a passionate promoter of arts, culture, and historic preservation. He has served on the Riverfront Commission, and the boards of the Pawtucket Arts Collaborative and the Pawtucket Foundation.

**Holly Ewald** is the founder of The Urban Pond Procession, a project that grew out of a commission from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts on behalf of the Department of Health (DOH) to create new signage around Mashapaug Pond warning against eating the fish and swimming in the water. As the artist and humanist on the project, Ewald took a community-led approach--instead of creating signs, she organized the community; instead of scaring people away from hazards, she gave residents a reason to care about the pond. Under Ewald's leadership, what was originally a sign-making project blossomed into a multifaceted place-based initiative that now includes active involvement of the Rhode Island's Native American community with historical roots at the Pond, a storm water project at the adjacent industrial park, a high-school curriculum based on the cultural and scientific opportunities presented at the site, a smartphone app for learning about the importance the Pond has played in people's lives, an annual parade featuring brass bands and celebrity puppets, and yes--signs.

**Vartan Gregorian Elementary School PTO** (Fox Point) first established I WAS THERE Project in the 2008-09 school year. From its inception, I WAS THERE has empowered the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students of Vartan Gregorian to connect with and care about their local community. The project's mission is to use oral histories and the arts to engage students in learning about the history and life of their school, the Fox Point community, and the natural environment that surrounds them. This powerful cross-disciplinary approach provides an opportunity for kids to learn from people in the community who have played a role in making history and engage with resident scholars and artists to create unique exhibits, salons, and works that examine how the neighborhood has progressed through time.

**John McNiff** was born and brought up in Rhode Island, went away, and came back. Raised in Warwick, he attended Rhode Island College and received his BA in History with a minor in Anthropology and received his MA in Anthropology, specializing in archaeology from SUNY Binghamton in New York. McNiff has been studying the works of Roger Williams for more than 25 years, 10 of them as an archaeologist here in New England and the last 15 as a Park Ranger with the National Park Service at Roger Williams National Memorial. He has presented countless public programs for schools, libraries, historical societies, retirement groups, scouts, religious groups, family groups and visitors from all over the world. He has also consulted, worked on, and appeared in several films about the Colonial period and particularly dealing with the early Colonial history of Rhode Island.

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