



RHODE ISLAND
COUNCIL *for* the HUMANITIES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 30, 2014

Contact: Adrian Moore

Development & Communications Manager

(401) 273-2250 x204

adrian@rihumanities.org

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 and here in Providence.

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** for creating and expanding the **Urban Pond Procession**, which bridges the humanities, arts, education, and public health to create a sense of place around Mashapaug Pond, bringing 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** for its cross-disciplinary **I WAS THERE Project**, which engages students in learning about the history and life of their school and the Fox Point community 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 sharing his passion for Rhode Island's unique history through countless programs that continue to inspire students, seniors, community members, and visitors to our state.

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>.

About the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities

The Rhode Island Council for the Humanities seeds, supports, and strengthens public history, cultural heritage, civic education, and community engagement by and for all Rhode Islanders. Founded in 1973, the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities is an independent affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. As a non-profit 501(c)3, the Council receives funding from federal and private sources. Since 1973, the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities has awarded over \$7.4 million in grants to support more than 550 organizations and individuals throughout the state of Rhode Island. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of Rhode Islanders have participated in Council-funded activities, including community conversations, workshops and lectures, new media technology, museum interpretations and exhibitions, walking-tours, radio shows, oral histories, documentary films, and many more.

-###-

Biographies of awardees are included below and project photos are attached. For more information, contact Adrian Moore at 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 an award-winning restaurant/hospitality designer. His work includes such projects as Euro Disney in France, Celebrations in Florida, Johnson & Wales University's Culinary Arts Museum, as well as projects for Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines and many restaurants in Rhode Island.

Having traveled widely and with offices in St. Maarten, Boston, and Providence, Morris returned to his roots in Pawtucket in 1985, when he purchased the former Rhode Island Cardboard Company. Nathanson convinced the city council to approve a zoning change that allowed for work/live-in spaces, and he created the first live/work artist community in the state of Rhode Island. This pivotal change brought artists to Pawtucket and opened the door for renovations to mill buildings across the state.

Over the last 29 years, he and his wife, Phyllis, have renovated this former mill complex into Blackstone Studios, which includes the offices of his design firm, numerous artisan studios, and the newly-completed historic renovation of the Design Exchange. Their efforts include the restoration of the former Lebanon Mill into Riverfront Lofts, a condominium community for artists, and the Pawtucket Armory into a performing arts center.

Nathanson has served on the boards of the Riverfront Commission, the 20/20 Commission, the Pawtucket Foundation, the Pawtucket Arts Collaborative, and Mixed Magic Theatre. As a

founding member of Trinity Theatre, Nathanson served as chairman of the building committee directing the conversion of the Majestic Cinema into Trinity Theatre. He, along with Conseulo Sherba, were the driving force behind the establishment of the Jacqueline Walsh School for the Arts. He also served on the building committee for the restoration of the Pawtucket Armory, which includes the Gamm Theatre.

Nathanson is deeply committed to civic initiatives in Pawtucket and Providence and is a passionate promoter of arts, culture, and historic preservation. His efforts have made significant contributions to the economic development of the city of Pawtucket, and demonstrate that arts and culture drive economic forces and transform communities. Nathanson holds honorary doctorate degrees from Johnson & Wales University and Rhode Island College.

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 of 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.

For more information, contact Adrian Moore at adrian@rihumanities.org or (401) 273-2250 x204.