2026 GREATER HOUSTON ARTS FORUM + TEXANS FOR THE ARTS SUMMIT & AWARDS

MEET THE SPEAKERS

Welcome Remarks

Grace Zuñiga



Grace Zuñiga is HAA's first-ever Chief Programming Officer (CPO), a new executive role that reflects its ongoing growth and commitment to serving Houston's diverse arts community. In her role, she oversees the daily development and implementation of HAA's public programs, collaborating with staff, artists, partners, and civic leaders to ensure programs run efficiently, connect with the community, and align with HAA's mission.

Grace has been with the organization since 2021, formerly serving as the Director of Civic Art, where she led the successful implementation of Houston's percent-for-art ordinance and managed a variety of public art projects that showcase the city's communities and civic values.

A Corpus Christi native, she earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi in 2007 and, in 2012, her Master of Fine Arts from the Lamar Dodd School of Art at the University of Georgia. For more than a decade, she has conributed to Houston's creative sector through leadership and teaching roles with Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts (MECA), Sawyer Yards, and Houston City College (HCC).

Blessings and Land Acknowledgement

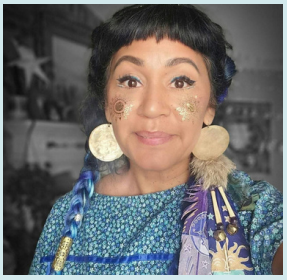
Absolem Yetzirah



Absolem Yetzirah is a Galveston-born Indigenous activist, U.S. military veteran, spiritual leader, and entrepreneur. He serves as a critical voice for the Karankawa Tribe of Texas, an Indigenous community long and incorrectly classified by colonial history as extinct. As a prominent tribal council member of the Five Rivers Council, Yetzirah represents the regional Coyote clan of the Galveston Bay and Houston metro areas. He has been instrumental in reconnecting isolated Karankawa descendants, moving the community past an era where families believed they were the "last" survivors.

Yetzirah was raised with the oral histories of his ancestors who inhabited the Gulf Coast for thousands of years. For generations, many Karankawa families safely guarded their lineages in secret, often identifying as other ethnicities to avoid the historical persecution and forced displacement that decimated the tribe in the 19th century. Recognizing the fragmented state of his people's history, Yetzirah made it a personal mission to seek out relatives and others carrying similar oral histories.

Farrah Godfrey



Farrah is passionate about sharing Karankawa history, raising awareness of Indigenous experiences, and keeping her people's stories, culture, and heritage alive for future generations. She believes in honoring her ancestors while helping ensure Indigenous voices continue to be heard.

As an intuitive henna artist, Farrah creates original designs guided by energy, intuition, and personal expression. Through her art, she brings together creativity, connection, and meaning.

Outside of her work, Farrah is a mother of two, raising her children alongside her husband. Family, cultural connection, creativity, and honoring the generations before and after us are important parts of who she is.

Welcome Remarks

Mark Folkes



Mark is President and CEO of The Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, one of Houston's largest nonprofit performing arts institutions, where he leads strategic direction and partners with the board and staff to advance programmatic, operational, and community goals. Previously as Managing Director at Stages, he led a $35.8 million capital campaign to build The Gordy, a transformative three-theater campus. Before that, he served as Senior Director of Development at the Houston Symphony, raising over $16 million annually. Mark's career spans Greater Houston Community Foundation, Canada's National Arts Centre, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Houston Grand Opera, and Planned Parenthood Gulf Coast, among others. Originally from Canada, he holds an MBA and Master of Arts in arts administration from the University of Cincinnati, and studied at the University of Waterloo and the Canadian College of Performing Arts.

Elisa Villanueva Beard



Elisa Villanueva Beard joined Houston Endowment as President and CEO in 2026, leading the Foundation's vision to create a vibrant region where all have the opportunity to thrive. She oversees more than $100 million in annual grantmaking across public education, civic engagement, arts and culture, and greenspaces. A South Texas native and longtime Houston resident, her leadership is grounded in trust, partnership, and mission-driven impact.

Villanueva Beard brings nearly three decades of experience, including a 27-year tenure at Teach For America where she served as CEO for 12 years, leading 1,500 staff, stewarding a $200 million endowment, and overseeing a $300 million operating enterprise. Her public service began as a TFA corps member teaching elementary students in Phoenix. She holds a B.A. in sociology from DePauw University and has been recognized among LinkedIn's Top 20 Voices in Social Impact and ALPFA's 50 Most Powerful Latinas.

Opening Plenary: What to Expect During the 90th Texas Legislative Session

Chris Kiley



Chris Kiley serves as the Executive Director of Texans for the Arts, the statewide network of arts leadership and advocates dedicated to growing public commitment to the arts. Chris served as the Associate Director at Texans for the Arts for six years prior to taking on the organization's senior leadership role in 2024. A native of New Hampshire, Chris relocated to Texas to do his graduate work at Texas Tech University, where he received a Masters of Fine Arts in Arts Administration. Chris currently serves on the Board of Austin Emerging Arts Leaders, a non-profit dedicated to developing the next generation of arts leadership in the Austin area and served as an adjunct graduate arts administration professor at his alma mater Texas Tech University from 2021-2023. Prior to working with Texans for the Arts, Chris served as the Executive Director of the Derryfield Repertory Summer Theatre from 2014 - 2017, located in Manchester, NH.

Gary Gibbs



Gary Gibbs, Ph.D., has been the Executive Director of the Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA) since 2007. Upon his arrival, Gibbs restructured the agency's grants programs by simplifying the application process and aligning the grants with the priorities of Texas state government: economic development, education, health and human services, criminal justice and public safety, and natural resources and agriculture. He also instituted the Cultural District program.

Marci Dallas



Marci Dallas serves as project lead for HouArts in Action, a region-wide initiative designed to strengthen Greater Houston's arts and culture sector through strategic advocacy, expanded partnerships, and unified messaging. This initiative, supported by Houston's seven state-designated Cultural Districts, is an effort to build champions for arts and culture in the Greater Houston Area. Marci works closely with Houston's cultural districts on collaborative strategies that celebrate the region's creative ecosystem and champion its role in civic life. In addition to her work with HouArts and Houston's cultural districts, Marci serves as Board President for Texans for the Arts where she works on non-partisan statewide arts advocacy to protect and increase funding for the arts at the state, national and local levels; and she teaches in the University of Houston's MA in Arts Leadership program where she supports the next generation of arts leaders.

Arts on the Ballot — Finding Your Voice

Jaison Oliver



Jaison Oliver is a community organizer who brings people and institutions together to facilitate collaborative policymaking and drive community-led change. He is the Founder & Principal of Selden Resources and leads the Third Ward Cultural District in Houston, TX. Jaison is a Detroit native and an alumnus of Yale University.

Mary Heathcott



Mary Heathcott is the Executive Director of the Contemporary at Blue Star, where she has led its exhibition and educational programs since 2014. Founded by San Antonio-based artists in 1986, the Contemporary has grown to engage international and regional artists through exhibitions; a residency partnership with the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin; public programs; outreach initiatives providing early access to artists and critical thinking techniques for young students; and an after-school program for high school youth seeking professional development in the field of art. Additionally, Mary is President of the Board of Directors of the San Antonio arts advocacy coalition Culture and Arts United for San Antonio (CAUSA) and serves on the board of Texans for the Arts.

Artist Advocacy - Sculpting Words for Our Story



Tony Diaz

Writer Tony Diaz, El Librotraficante, is a Cultural Accelerator. He was the first Chicano to earn a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. In 1998, he founded Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say (NP), Houston's first reading series for Latino authors. The group galvanized Houston's community cultural capital into a movement for civil rights, education, and representation. When Arizona officials banned Mexican American Studies, Diaz and four veteran members of NP organized the 2012 Librotraficante Caravan to smuggle books from the banned curriculum back into Arizona. He is the author of the novel The Aztec Love God and The Tip of the Pyramid: Cultivating Community Cultural Capital. In 2024, the BIPOC Arts Network and Fund recognized Nuestra Palabra as a Houston Cultural Treasure. Currently, NP is organizing The Houston Text Fest, Saturday, October 17, 2026, celebrating storytelling in all forms.

Advocacy Leadership — Advanced Strategies for Arts Administrators & Experienced Advocates



Chris Kiley

Chris Kiley serves as the Executive Director of Texans for the Arts, the statewide network of arts leadership and advocates dedicated to growing public commitment to the arts. Chris served as the Associate Director at Texans for the Arts for six years prior to taking on the organization's senior leadership role in 2024. A native of New Hampshire, Chris relocated to Texas to do his graduate work at Texas Tech University, where he received a Masters of Fine Arts in Arts Administration. Chris currently serves on the Board of Austin Emerging Arts Leaders, a non-profit dedicated to developing the next generation of arts leadership in the Austin area and served as an adjunct graduate arts administration professor at his alma mater Texas Tech University from 2021-2023. Prior to working with Texans for the Arts, Chris served as the Executive Director of the Derryfield Repertory Summer Theatre from 2014 - 2017, located in Manchester, NH.

Bailey Pownall



Bailey Pownall is Deputy Director of Texans for the Arts and co-founder of Mural Supply Co. His work spans arts advocacy, public art and community partnerships, connecting artists, organizations and communities across Texas and internationally. At Texans for the Arts, he supports statewide programming, membership, fundraising and resources that help strengthen the arts sector. Through Mural Supply Co., he helps bring murals, creative projects and cultural events to life. Bailey also serves on the Austin Arts Commission and as Vice President of Emerging Arts Leaders Austin.

Lunchtime Performance

Priscilla Salisbury

International award-winning Mexican-born soprano Priscilla Salisbury is dedicated to connecting cultures through sacred, classical, and Latin American music. Named Best Female Singer at the inaugural Catholic Music Awards in Rome, she brings more than two decades of experience as a performer, and sacred music leader.



A Houston-based artist, Priscilla has performed with Houston Grand Opera, Seattle Opera, Opera in the Heights, and Winter Opera St. Louis, and has been featured as a soloist in major sacred works including the Fauré Requiem, Mozart's Vesperae solennes de Confessore and Dan Forrest's Requiem for the Living. Her work celebrating Mexican Indigenous music earned a "Let Creativity Happen!" Artist Grant from the City of Houston, supporting her sold-out Nahuatl art-song concert featuring Aztec dancers and highlighting the rich musical heritage of Mexico's Indigenous cultures.

As an educator, Priscilla has served as a university professor at Texas Southern University and Houston Grand Opera Teaching Artist. Through Aria Music, her private studio, and her national music workshops for church musicians, she mentors singers and equips communities to use their voices with artistry, confidence, and meaningful expression.

Teruhiko Toda



Mr. Toda earned his Bachelor's in Piano Performance and a graduate diploma in Piano Accompaniment from the Tokyo College of Music, where he later served as associate professor coaching opera students. He began his career as a solo pianist with a recital in Italy in 1996, before working as an opera conductor, assistant conductor, and pianist/coach in Tokyo, including as Assistant Conductor/Répétiteur for the New National Theatre Tokyo. His operatic repertoire spans over 60 complete operas, with engagements at the RAI Torino Symphony Orchestra and Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, working alongside conductors and singers of international renown.

Currently a staff accompanist at the University of Houston and Lone Star College Kingwood, Mr. Toda previously served as Music Director of Houston Grand Opera's outreach program and Assistant Conductor/Head Répétiteur at Opera in the Heights. Notable performances include an engagement for President George H.W. Bush and recitals with Metropolitan Opera soprano Michelle Bradley.

Xiuhollin Huehuecoyotl

Xiuhollin Huehuecoyotl is a community-based Aztec dance group founded in 2024, rooted in a deep reverence for Indigenous tradition, ancestral wisdom, and community connection. The group's journey began in 2003 when its founder first began practicing Danza Azteca in Houston, Texas. Building on over two decades of dedicated practice, study, and growth, Xiuhollin Huehuecoyotl was created to carry forward the living heritage of traditional Danza.

As a cultural dance group, Xiuhollin Huehuecoyotl is devoted to preserving and honoring the sacred movements and teachings passed down directly by traditional elders and teachers from Mexico. Through vibrant rhythm, ceremony, and dance, the group tells powerful stories, honors the natural elements, and gives thanks to the sacred forces and living animals of the Earth, keeping the ancestral spirit thriving in Houston and beyond.

Isaac MacDonald



Isaac MacDonald is the Director of Planning & Impact at Trepwise, a strategy consulting firm that aligns people, process, and vision for purpose-driven organizations.

Isaac specializes in ‘systems transformation’ projects that span multiple disciplines, with a focus on arts & culture, youth development, and climate action. Recent projects have included a long-term strategy for the Houston Cultural Districts and HouArts in Action, visioning for StudioBE and the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and Foundation, and a strategic plan for the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft.

Isaac has a degree in Urban Studies from Brown University, where he founded the Urban Journal. Isaac was a Fellow with Venture for America and the New Leaders Council, and recently attended the Amsterdam Complexity School on Climate Change.

RUEROB



RUEROB (he/him/we) is a cultural strategist, nonprofit leader, and arts advocate with a decade of experience building programs that uplift creative communities. He is on the leadership team with HouArts in Action, BLD PWR, the Black Panther Party Museum, and numerous grassroots initiatives in the Houston and beyond.

RUEROB is an actor, recording artist, and creative economy expert who bridges economic opportunities in the creative ecosystem with artists and cultural leaders working and living in Houston.

With roots in both the performing arts and nonprofit leadership, RUEROB is passionate about advancing equity in Houston’s arts ecosystem, cultivating sustainable careers for artists, and ensuring that historically marginalized communities are centered in cultural policy and practice.

José Antonio Diaz



José Antonio Diaz is a nationally acclaimed music educator, conductor, and Latin jazz leader. Recently selected to receive the Midwest Clinic Medal of Honor, he is a DownBeat Jazz Education Hall of Fame inductee, GRAMMY Music Educator Award Top 10 finalist, and Past-President of the Jazz Education Network. He serves on the Midwest Clinic Board of Directors. His honors include the Texas Bandmasters Association's Meritorious Achievement Award, the CMA Music Teacher of Excellence Award, and Berklee's John LaPorta Jazz Educator Award.

Diaz founded Houston's Diaz Music Institute in 2000 and serves as its Artistic Director and Music Director of the Houston Latin Jazz Orchestra. Under his leadership, DMI's acclaimed Caliente youth ensemble earned consecutive DownBeat awards for Best Latin Jazz Group in 2025 and 2026. Following 36 years directing bands at MacArthur High School, he continues connecting underserved youth with world-class artists, transformative performance experiences, and pathways to college.

Katie Creeggan-Ríos



Katie Leigh Creeggan-Ríos is the Executive Director of the Houston Cinema Arts Society. She is a native Houstonian and worked professionally as a Stage Manager for ten years before transitioning into the world of community engagement through film. As the Executive Director of Houston Cinema Arts Society, Katie is the Executive Producer of the Houston Cinema Arts Festival, the largest independent and international film festival in the City of Houston. She is also the Co-Founder and Executive Producer for the Houston Media Conference, the largest regional professional development expo geared towards media professionals in Texas. She received her B.F.A. in Stage Management from the University of Houston School of Theatre & Dance and her M.A. in Arts Leadership from the University of Houston College of the Arts. She is also a proud member of the Actors' Equity Association.

Public Funding for Arts Organizations — Navigating Resources to Sustain Your Work

Frances Valdez



Frances Valdez (she/her) is the executive director of Houston in Action, a nonprofit building a regional ecosystem of approximately 100 organizations across the Greater Houston Region. HiA coordinates, trains, and resources community organizers, communicators, and advocates; regrants millions of dollars annually; and leads campaigns that shape civic participation and improve quality of life across the region. Under her leadership, HiA has helped partners expand census participation, COVID vaccinations, and voter turnout, win disaster relief funds at the city level, and organize around issues including immigration, public safety, and environmental and climate justice.

Prior to joining HiA, Valdez spent 13 years as an immigration attorney.

Sixto Wagan, Jr.



Sixto Wagan (he/him) is a Houston-based cultural leader whose creative and professional practice is deeply rooted in collective action, contemporary performance, and community care. For three decades, he has championed equity and storytelling through roles as an artist, curator, educator, and nonprofit director. He currently serves as Executive Director of Houston in Color, formerly known as BIPOC Arts Network and Fund (BANF). Sixto previously founded the Center for Art and Social Engagement (CASE) at University of Houston and led DiverseWorks for over 11 years, advancing artist-driven projects and research initiatives that interrogate social, political, and cultural narratives. He also serves on the Grantmakers in the Arts board of directors.

Armando Silva



A proud immigrant from Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas, Mexico, Armando G. Silva is a former professional dancer and choreographer with Dallas Black Dance Theatre (DBDT) and a respected arts administrator with more than 20 years of experience. He currently serves as Executive Director of Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts (MECA), overseeing daily operations, arts education, outreach programs, MECA Presents, and the organization's annual Día de Muertos Festival.

Mr. Silva's career includes leadership roles with DBDT, Lula Elzy New Orleans Dance Theatre, and Voices Breaking Boundaries. He is a 2009 graduate of the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture Leadership Institute and completed Rice University's 2025 Leadership in Action program for nonprofit professionals and first-time executive directors. He currently serves on Houston's LGBTQ Mayoral Advisory Board.

A Houston native by education, Silva attended the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, Southern Methodist University, and The Ailey School in New York City.



Carris Adams

Carris Adams is an artist and administrator currently living in Northwest Arkansas.

Funding Leadership — Advancing Public Investment for Arts Organizations

Chris Heinbaugh



Chris Heinbaugh is Chief Advocacy Officer at the AT&T Performing Arts Center in the Dallas Arts District where his work focuses on supporting the city's large and diverse arts community. A former Emmy Award-winning journalist and former chief of staff to a Dallas mayor, he's built an unusual skill set that he uses on behalf of the arts. He works closely with other arts leaders building strategies to grow and protect arts funding at Dallas City Hall. He provided collaborative leaders in the successful effort to get 15% of the City's Hotel Occupancy Tax dedicated to the arts. His board service includes the Dallas Area Cultural Advocacy Coalition, Visit Dallas, and the Dallas Economic Development Corporation. A longtime member of Texans for the Arts, he now serves as TFA's Vice President of Advocacy and Programs.

Shannon Ghangurde



Shannon Ghangurde has two decades of legislative and state budget experience working in the Texas Legislature. Prior to starting her own practice, Shannon served as the Committee Director for the Senate Finance Committee where she oversaw the budget writing process for all areas of state government, including health care, education, transportation, natural resources and general government services. During her time at the Capitol, she also served as the Committee Director for the Senate Health and Human Services Committee and General Counsel to Texas Senator Jane Nelson, where she helped lead negotiations on initiatives including the health care portion of the state budget, Medicaid reform, advances for mental health, and the creation of the nation’s largest cancer research institute, CPRIT.

Shannon holds a B.A. in government from UT Austin and a law degree from the Washington College of Law at American University. Shannon resides in Austin with her husband and two children.

Activate Your Data

Jennifer Benoit-Bryan



Jen Benoit-Bryan, Ph.D., is the Executive Director of DataArts and Marriott Family Endowed Professor at Southern Methodist University. At DataArts, Jen collaborates with cultural sector catalysts, like foundations, city, and state arts agencies, to leverage data and research in service of strong, vibrant, and equitable arts communities. She's collaborated on a number of significant arts research initiatives including the data framework for the World Culture Cities Forum, tracking the public's interest in arts engagement through Culture Track, the development of the thirty-city City Arts Data Exchange, and an evaluation of the national and regional America's Cultural Treasures grant programs. A recognized leader in arts research methodologies, Dr. Benoit-Bryan frequently contributes her expertise as an advisor and grant reviewer for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and many arts service organizations. Jen's research focuses on the conditions that support vibrant arts ecosystems, the sustainability and well-being of the cultural workforce, and the community impacts of equitable access to the arts.

Jana Fredricks



Jana Fredricks (she/her) is Founder and CEO of Hatch Creative Strategy, a consultancy focused on arts, culture, and environmental education across the Gulf South. She leads research, evaluation, and strategy that help organizations understand their impact and shape what comes next. Her current portfolio includes supporting cultural districts across Houston and Galveston, evaluation of the National Academies' Gulf Research Program's place-based education grants, and evaluation implementation and sensemaking support for South Arts. She connects evidence, community perspectives, and organizational learning to inform decisions and tell compelling stories of change.

Born and raised in New Orleans, Jana brings over 15 years of experience in arts education, cultural production, and organizational leadership. Her approach combines analytical rigor, creative thinking, and collaborative facilitation. She holds master's degrees from Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Bologna and a BFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

Angela Carranza



Angela Carranza is Executive Director of Fresh Arts and Cultural Arts Director for Arts District Houston, a state-designated cultural district managed by Fresh Arts. With more than 15 years at Fresh Arts — beginning as an intern — she has led multidisciplinary arts programming, large-scale public initiatives, regional artist survey efforts, and expanded access to resources for creatives across Greater Houston.

A native Houstonian, Angela holds a BA in Art History with a minor in Studio Arts from the University of Houston. She brings a balance of creative and business expertise, including a decade of experience in small business operations and residential interior design. She is an active community volunteer with United Way of Greater Houston, the City of Houston's Mayor's Millennial Advisory Board, and the Houston Alliance of Latinx Artists, and currently serves as Vice Chair of the Board of Directors for Barrio Dogs.

Shareef Rabie



Shareef Rabie is the Senior Data and Analytics Manager at Houston Arts Alliance, where he leads data strategy across the organization's grantmaking, civic art, and resilience and recovery work. He manages HAA's data from end to end, designing systems to collect, structure, and safeguard it, and turning it into the analysis that informs City Council and Houston's arts sector. Shareef's work traces how public arts funding moves across the city and measures what it delivers for artists and organizations, for neighborhoods, and for Houston's economy. Throughout, the goal is to show what public arts investment returns and what it makes possible.

Jack McBride



Jack McBride is a nonprofit professional and arts education advocate from Houston, Texas. With over 20 years of experience in the nonprofit community, including at the AmeriCorps, the University of Texas, and Writers in the Schools, Jack's work has focused on equity of arts access for children, strategic planning, LGBTQ+ equality, and advocacy for artists, writers, and teachers. Growing up in San Angelo, Texas, Jack spent summers at the local library and played trombone in the high school band, experiences that demonstrated first-hand the value and impact of an arts-rich education for young people. He serves on the emeritus board of Equality Texas and is a Senior Fellow (Class 64) of the American Leadership Forum. Jack has a B.A. in Art History and Spanish from Trinity University and a Masters in Nonprofit Administration from the University of Notre Dame. In their spare time, Jack and his husband Thain really enjoy drinking margaritas.

Hack the Storycraft

Claudia de Vasco



Claudia de Vasco is a Houston native; she built her early career as an actor and director, learning firsthand what it takes to put work in front of an audience. Today she leads from the other side of the curtain as Executive Director of Miller Outdoor Theatre. Under her leadership, Miller has expanded its operational role, undertaken its first major strategic plan, and spear-headed fundraising for and completed the first project of its capital campaign. She continues to lead that campaign and the ongoing transformation of this historic venue. Claudia is a DeVos Institute Global Arts Management Fellow and an American Leadership Forum Senior Fellow. She serves on the boards of the Houston Museum District, ALMAAH, and Texans for the Arts, as well as on the leadership team of HouArts. She believes access to the arts can transform a city and its communities.

Craig Hauschildt



Dr. Craig Hauschildt is a dynamic arts leader, community advocate, and musician with a proven record of bringing together artists and community members across disciplines to pursue shared goals. Drawing on more than two decades of administrative and artistic experience, he champions a holistic vision of advocacy that benefits both artists and arts organizations. He currently serves as Executive Director of the Houston Theater District and continues to perform for Houston audiences in many of the city's most iconic and prestigious venues.

Jennifer Bowman



Jennifer Bowman is a strategic leader, founder, and connector working across nonprofit, mission-aligned corporate, and social impact sectors. She is the Founder and Principal Consultant of JMB Creative Strategies, where she partners with organizations and leaders to bring structure, clarity, and momentum to purpose-driven work—translating ideas into actionable, sustainable solutions.

With nearly two decades of experience spanning arts and culture, educational, and community institutions, Jennifer is known for aligning people, partnerships, and resources to move complex initiatives forward. Her work bridges vision and execution, with strategies grounded in community and designed for real-world implementation.

Through both her independent practice and institutional leadership roles, Jennifer has built a track record of designing and advancing initiatives that connect mission to action. She has worked with organizations including Houston Grand Opera, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and the Music Academy of the West, partnering with executives, funders, artists, and community leaders to deliver work that is both impactful and sustainable.

Joel Luks



Joel Luks is a marketing and communications strategist, arts advocate, educator, and journalist with more than two decades of experience in Houston's cultural community. As Marketing and Communications Director at the Hobby Center, he helps advance the organization's mission to connect audiences, artists, and communities.

His career spans strategic communications, public relations, and journalism, including leadership of award-winning campaigns for national brands and nonprofit organizations. As the former arts and entertainment editor and classical music critic for CultureMap Houston, he chronicled the city's vibrant cultural community and helped shape conversations about the role of the arts in Houston.

An adjunct professor at the University of Houston, Luks teaches marketing, communications, and artificial intelligence in the arts. A classically trained flutist, he holds degrees from the Eastman School of Music and Rice University's Shepherd School of Music.

Marissa Saenz



With 17 years of ad industry experience, Marissa has worked across various categories. Her portfolio includes national promotional marketing campaigns for: Walmart, Bank of America, Guerrero Tortillas (Mission Foods), Verizon Fios, KRAFT Singles, Maxwell House, Dr Pepper Snapple Group, Heineken, Miller Lite, Bud Light and Chivas Regal. Event Production for AT&T, D'USSE Cognac, Cazadores Tequila, McCord Development, Mary Kay, Remezcla, The City of Houston and Super Bowl XI Houston.

Marissa is the executive producer of Madness on Main Independent music festival, established in 2013. She also works on festival sponsorship integration for various Texas fests.

Marissa left the corporate advertising industry in 2013 after finding her passion in event production and launching her boutique experiential marketing agency. With her experience, she's pushing the industry to invest dollars into regional events produced by the local music and art community.

Deep Dive: Advanced Advocacy

Krystal Jones



As Director of the City of San Antonio's Department of Arts & Culture, Krystal Jones leads the strategy and public investment behind one of the nation's largest municipally funded arts ecosystems. She oversees a wide-ranging portfolio that includes grantmaking, public art, the San Antonio Film Commission, city galleries, and cultural initiatives such as the Poet Laureate Program. Krystal's leadership centers on building cross-sector partnerships and advancing the role of arts and culture as essential drivers of civic identity, economic vitality, and community connection. Under her direction, San Antonio has secured historic public art investments, launched Texas's strongest municipal film incentive, and expanded opportunities and support for local artists. A dedicated cultural administrator and arts advocate, she is committed to broadening access to creative experiences and championing the transformative impact of arts and culture in communities.

Fiona Bond



Fiona is founding CEO of Creative Waco. She came to Waco from the UK, where she directed cultural initiatives in higher education, faith and economic development. She has a BA (hons) in Theology from Durham University (UK) and an MBA (hons) from The Hankamer School of Business at Baylor University. She is author of 'The Arts in Your Church' (Piquant, 2001), serves as a panelist for Texas Commission on the Arts and National Endowment for the Arts, was named "Wacoan of the Year" in December 2020, and served as President of Texans For The Arts from 2021 - 2025. She just won the regional AFRP "Communitarian of the Year" award, and is currently a finalist for "Leading Waco Woman" Award from Greater Waco Chamber.

Fiona is passionate about creating well-rounded, vibrant communities in which all participants can thrive.

She juggles her role as Executive Director of Creative Waco with family life, and plays bagpipes with her younger son for relaxation.

Sam Bowler



Sam Touche Bowler is an artist (sculpture, fashion design) who became a technologist to build he wish existed -- a way to know and support the people creating culture in each place.

Taylor Jackson



Taylor Jackson serves as CEO of Houston Arts Alliance (HAA), a nonprofit dedicated to implementing the City of Houston's vision for arts grant making and civic art investments. Taylor oversees HAA's core operations, conducted through contracts with the City of Houston and monitored by the Mayor's Office of the Arts. Under her leadership, HAA distributes millions annually to support local artists, arts organizations, and community groups.

Taylor also guides HAA's execution of privately funded programs that address needs within the arts community. These include community resiliency and research on the state of the arts in Houston. Through her strategic vision and commitment, Taylor ensures HAA remains a vital force in sustaining and enhancing Houston's cultural landscape.

Taylor previously served as HAA's Director of Grants. Before joining HAA, she was Executive Director at Providence ¡CityArts! for Youth in Providence, RI. Taylor holds an M.A. in Public Humanities from Brown University and a B.A. in History from Rhodes College in Memphis, TN.

Texans for the Arts Awards

Bao-Long Chu



Bao-Long Chu oversees strategy to support and grow Houston's arts, culture, and parks ecosystem at Houston Endowment, collaborating with artists and community leaders toward a vibrant city with abundant opportunities to create and connect.

Originally from Vietnam, Chu is a storyteller whose passion for writing led him to the MFA creative writing program at the University of Houston. He brings extensive background in literacy, arts, and community engagement, developed during his tenure as Associate Director of Writers in the Schools. His poems and essays have appeared in several anthologies, and his libretto for the opera Bound, composed by Huang Ruo, has premiered in Houston, New York, Seattle, and Anchorage.

SMU DataArts named Chu the 2025–2027 Nasher-Haemisegger Fellow, through which he serves as the research center's ambassador to the national arts sector. He holds a BA in English and psychology from Houston Christian University and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Houston.

Michele Leal



Michele Leal is an influential arts administrator appointed as the Director of the City of Houston Office of Arts. Michele Leal's career in arts administration is marked by a consistent commitment to cultural development within Houston. Prior to her recent appointment, Leal held a significant role as the mayoral-appointed Chair of the Houston Arts Alliance, a non-profit organization instrumental in executing the City of Houston's arts programs, including public art installations and grants.

Her experience also includes serving as Development Director for El Centro de Corazón from 2008 to 2011, where she contributed to the organization's growth. Concurrently, Leal has been a dedicated board member of the Latin Women's Initiative since 2008, showcasing her long-standing engagement with community and cultural advocacy. In recognition of her contributions, she was honored with the Mayor's Hispanic Heritage Award in 2025.

Wesley Gentle



Wesley Gentle serves as Executive Director of Arts Fort Worth, where he leads strategic initiatives that champion, support, and sustain the city's vibrant arts community. With a strong background in arts administration, nonprofit leadership, and community engagement, Wesley works closely with artists, organizations, civic leaders, and funders to strengthen Fort Worth's cultural ecosystem. His leadership emphasizes collaboration, access, and long term sustainability, helping position the arts as a vital component of the region's economic and civic life. He currently serves on the Board of Directors of Texans for the Arts

Randy Ham



Randy Ham is Executive Director of Odessa Arts and a respected leader in the Texas arts and library community with over two decades of experience in arts administration, fundraising, and literacy initiatives. Under his leadership, Odessa Arts has achieved Cultural District Recognition from the Texas Commission on the Arts and secured millions in municipal and private funding through citywide cultural planning.

Randy serves as Secretary of Texans for the Arts, Chair of Arts Advocacy Day, and Music Friendly Texas West Texas Regional Chair. He is the founder of One Book Odessa and Books in the Basin, two signature literacy initiatives connecting readers, writers, and institutions across West Texas. Through Cultural Compass Consulting, he supports communities, nonprofits, and institutions in building lasting impact through strategy, storytelling, and sustainable growth.

Known for his dynamic public speaking and advocacy training, Randy empowers organizations to articulate their value and strengthen their community impact.

Performers

Kam Franklin



Kam Franklin is a Houston-born interdisciplinary artist, singer-songwriter, activist, and lead vocalist of gulf coast soul band The Suffers. A three-time Houston Press Music Award winner for Best Female Vocalist and two-time Local Musician of the Year, she has performed on five continents, including with The Suffers backed by the Houston Symphony, and on national television on The Late Show, Jimmy Kimmel Live, and The Daily Show.

Known for genre-defying collaborations — from Newport Folk Festival tributes with Chaka Khan and Brandi Carlile to the 2016 March for Science band alongside Jon Batiste and Questlove — Kam is equally celebrated for her activism. Featured by Forbes and Vice for her work creating a more equitable arts environment for Black, queer, femme, and non-binary artists, she released the social justice EP Bayou City Comeback Chorus in 2022. She serves as Governor for the Texas and Oklahoma Chapter of the Recording Academy and on the board of HeadCount.org.

Sunny Sauceda y Todo Eso

Two-time Grammy Award-winning entertainer Sunny Sauceda is one of Texas' most versatile and recognizable performers, blending Texas Country, Tex-Mex, and Tejano influences into a high-energy live experience that appeals to diverse audiences across the Southwest.



Known for his powerful vocals, exceptional accordion playing, and commanding stage presence, Sunny has built a loyal fan base through decades of touring, recording, and headlining festivals, fairs, casinos, rodeos, dance halls, and corporate events.

Whether performing traditional favorites, Texas Country hits, or his own signature blend of Tex-Mex music, Sunny consistently delivers a show that brings audiences together and keeps them engaged from the first song to the last encore.

As a two-time Grammy Award winner and respected ambassador of Texas music, Sunny Sauceda continues to expand his reach by connecting with both Hispanic and mainstream country audiences while staying true to the roots that made him one of the most respected entertainers in the industry.