



December 22, 2014

Leeway Foundation Announces 2014 Transformation Awards

Nine local artists and cultural producers receive honor and \$135,000 in grants celebrating their work at the intersection of art and social change

Media Contact:

Denise Beek
dbeek@leeway.org
215.545.4078 x14
www.leeway.org

PHILADELPHIA – Nine women and trans* artists representing three counties in the Greater Philadelphia area have been named 2014 Leeway Transformation Awardees, the foundation announced today.

The Awards are granted annually to artists who have demonstrated a practice of art and social change for five years or more. The 2014 awards were presented to a diverse group of artists and cultural producers working in a range of disciplines including literary, media and performance arts.

“In our ninth cycle of the Transformation Award, the brilliant women and trans* award recipients we have supported are doing crucial work at a critical time,” says Program Director, Sham-e-Ali Nayeem. “In the midst of bleak times, they are creating art and impacting communities in innovative and purposeful ways. They each guide us towards the world we want to see.”

Leeway’s Transformation Award recognizes women and trans* artists and cultural producers whose work has impacted a larger group, audience, or community. The \$15,000 award is merit-based; project proposals are not required and the funds are unrestricted.

Out of over 70 applicants, the following nine artists were selected to receive the 2014 Leeway Transformation Award (in alphabetical order):

- **Annie Mok** of West Philadelphia, Literary Arts and Visual Arts
- **Debora Kodish** of West Philadelphia, Folk Art
- **Ezra Berkley Nepon** of West Philadelphia, Performance and Literary Arts
- **Kariamuwelsh** of Wyndmoor, Performance and Literary Arts
- **Michelle Myers** of Camden Riverfront, Performance
- **O** of North Philadelphia, Performance
- **Sara Zia Ebrahimi** of Wyndmoor, Media Arts
- **Sosena Solomon** of Fairmount, Media Arts and Visual Arts
- **Tokay Tomah** of Upper Darby, Music and Folk Art

Artist profiles to follow.

A national panel convened to review applications and work samples in two stages. The 2014 panel consisted of: writer and producer **fayemi shakur**; poet and professor **Lorna Dee Cervantes**; performance artist and arts educator **S.T. Shimi**; media artist and documentarian **Seyi Adebajo**; and media artist and previous Transformation Award recipient **Yowei Shaw** (LTA '13, ACG '13, '12, '11, '10, '09). **Sage Crump**, cultural strategist, facilitated the second stage. Panelist bios to follow.

The selection process began in the spring of 2014 with an open application. A panel of national artists, activists, and cultural producers representing a variety of artistic and cultural practices met in the summer and made selections for a group of finalists to move on to the second stage. In the winter, the panel reviewed the second stage applications along with work samples, and made final decisions for the awards to be given to a group who, as emerging, mid-career, and established artists, fully embody Leeway's mission.

Applications are made available on the Leeway website, and may also be obtained by calling 215.545.4078 or emailing info@leeway.org. The next Leeway Transformation Award deadline is May 15, 2015. Potential applicants are encouraged to attend one of the many workshops and support sessions held throughout the year, or schedule an appointment with a foundation staff member for one-on-one support.

Press inquiries should be directed to Denise Beek at (215) 545-4078, ext. 14 or dbeek@leeway.org.

**We use the term "trans" in its most inclusive sense, as an umbrella term encompassing transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, Two-Spirit people, and more generally, anyone whose gender identity or gender expression is nonconforming and/or different from their gender assigned at birth.*

ABOUT LEEWAY

The Leeway Foundation supports women and transgender artists and cultural producers working in communities at the intersection of art, culture, and social change. Through our grantmaking and other programs we promote artistic expression that amplifies the voices of those on the margins, promotes sustainable and healthy communities, and works in the service of movements for economic and social justice. For more information about Leeway, its grant programs, grantees and events, visit www.leeway.org.

Photos and images are available upon request.

###



2014 Leeway Transformation Award Recipients

Annie Mok

West Philadelphia
Literary Arts and Visual Arts

Annie is a comic book creator who seeks to affirm the lives and experiences of trans* women and survivors. Through her fictional and memoir-based comics, she aims to agitate, engage and encourage inquiry. Annie works to inspire personal and artistic confidence by breaking down feelings of isolation within her community. In her art, Annie explores themes of trans* women's identity, long-term effects of sexual abuse and disability stemming from mental illness. She was a recipient of the Xeric Grant for Comic Book Self-Publishing and her work has been featured in several anthologies, comic conventions, galleries, and events. Annie also tours her work in an ongoing transnational series of readings, which include guest readers whose work examines racism, abuse, and marginalization in beautiful and striking ways. Annie creates space and prioritizes artists and readers who identify as trans* female, disabled, queer, and/or people of color.

Debora Kodish

West Philadelphia
Folk Arts

Debora is a cultural worker and organizer who has been committed to supporting the growth and development of folk arts for over 30 years. A self-described "facilitator, cultivator, clarifier, instigator, and midwife for change," she creates contexts and settings through which diverse people can imagine and build community. She is the founder of the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP), an institution that is characterized by the creative development of folk arts as a tool for justice, power and self-knowledge. Through her 27 years as director of PFP, Debora supported over 350+ folk artists and cultural workers in the development of their own work in folk arts and social change. Debora situates herself in collaborative and collective action and fights for educational equity through her development of FACTS Charter School. Her goal is to foster folk arts theory and practice in order to regenerate the ground of culture, and build resources for movements as well as seed, strengthen, and cultivate culturally healthy communities.

Ezra Berkley Nepon

West Philadelphia
Performance and Literary Arts

Ezra's work as an artist and activist comes from their hunger for stories and spaces that allow marginalized people to know they are not alone. Whether using film, theatre, writing, or organizing, Ezra makes art in conversation with their communities, while also intending to keep it accessible to those outside their circles. An active member of the queer, trans, and radical Jewish communities, they make space for people to find each other, see each other, and let their walls down in the rare places where their pieces fit together with healing edges exposed. Ezra has showcased their work from living rooms, salons, synagogues, and anarchist bookstores to cabarets, art auctions, and international festivals. They use "dazzle camouflage," a technique that uses surrealism, satire, camp, and humor to disarm and charm those who might at first be hostile to their messages. They believe that visibility to each other in a world that tells us we don't exist or matter is part of our path to healing and building power.

Kariamu Welsh

Wyndmoor
Performance and Literary Arts

Kariamu's work as a dancer, choreographer, and educator seeks to tell stories, relate history, and retrieve myths, legends, and narratives that speak to the struggle and strengths of the African diaspora. Also known lovingly as "Mama Kariamu," she uses movement vocabulary that reflects and challenges oppression and injustice. Over 40 years ago, she developed the *Umfundalai* dance technique as a means to see and accept each other in the present moment. Since then, it has been the vehicle through which she creates, as it reflects her history, aesthetic, and heritage. Kariamu does a number of outreach programs a year, which have targeted women in prisons and teenagers at risk. Her work crosses generations and sheds light on the lives of marginalized people.

Michelle Myers

Camden Riverfront
Performance

Michelle is a spoken word poet who aims to raise awareness about social injustices and build positive relationships across communities. With over 14 years of experience, she believes that poetry can be a bridge to community building where people learn, reflect, communicate, share, compromise, and connect. She teaches at Philadelphia Community College and is a founding member of Yellow Rage, a dynamic duo of Philly-based Asian American spoken word poets, and has showcased her work at multiple events, including *HBO's Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. On the page and stage, she explores intersections of race, culture, gender, community, and self. By sharing her emotions and experiences, she draws in disparate and marginalized people to create a balanced vision of community and translates that vision into reality.

O

North Philadelphia
Performance

O is a solo performance artist and creative placemaker. A self-described “organizer, educator, healer, provider of calm, and nurturing energy in a world that is relentless in its chaos and violence,” O challenges traditional social, political, and gender roles through her work, amplifying the voices of people most affected by injustice. In 2010, she co-founded Serenity House, a community healing center in North Philadelphia where art is used to foster personal and social transformation. Here, she forges collaborative partnerships between communities, creates safe spaces, and facilitates the Women in the Round and Men in the Round programs, where people interested in healing and transformation work can gather. O believes that social change is best brought about by the people who need it the most and the lasting progress that comes from building their strength to advocate on their own behalf. She hopes to use her artistic abilities as a revitalization tool to educate, preserve celebrate, support, improve, and transform community.

Sara Zia Ebrahimi

Wyndmoor
Media Arts

Sara Zia is a filmmaker and film curator dedicated to blurring the line between artist and activist. Through her work, she explores issues of displacement and the experiences of first generation immigrants in innovative ways. Sara Zia poses questions that don't often get asked, pushing audiences to be active media consumers rather than passive spectators. As a curator, Sara Zia aims to build community and offer space for dialogue and learning. For Sara Zia, who she chooses to work with is not just about the individual, but also about accountability to the community. She has hosted screenings programmed by women, people of color, and LGBT people to challenge the dominant tendency of film festivals and independent film venues.

Sosena Solomon

Fairmount
Media Arts and Visual Arts

Sosena is a social documentary filmmaker, photographer, and visual artist whose art for social change work focuses on visually documenting personal narratives of underrepresented communities that are facing some aspect of change. As an Ethiopian-American who comes from a family of storytellers, she seeks to capture a moment in time before it disappears. By doing so, she hopes that these experiences can live on so that other generations may engage and learn from them. Sosena documents marginalized communities and subcultures and engages audiences through discussions of her work. She also conducts a travelling interactive installation experience that allows people to engage with multimedia art and each other. Sosena's goal is to culturally preserve and share unheard voices, offering her viewers, as well as herself, a deeper intimacy and understanding of others.

Tokay Tomah

Upper Darby

Music and Folk Arts

Tokay is a singer, songwriter, and recording artist who seeks to inspire critical thinking, dialogue, and action through her music. As a Liberian immigrant woman with over 25 years of experience in her field, she has been a member of Liberia's National Cultural Troupe, performing various songs and dances across the country and abroad. Through her art, she raises awareness around issues of gender equality, cultural preservation, conflict resolution, immigrant concerns, domestic violence, and HIV/AIDS, aiming to help people discuss and discover ways to create change. Tokay feels a responsibility to speak about injustices in her community. She sings traditional and original songs to Liberian audiences to start conversations around these important issues. When she performs in the various languages of Liberia, she helps to preserve her culture's rich song and storytelling traditions. She teaches rhythms that have meaning and reinforces appreciation of those traditions and meanings. She currently performs with the Liberian Women's Chorus for Change.



2014 Leeway Transformation Award Panelists

fayemi shakur

Writer, editor, and activist fayemi shakur first began writing political and cultural news stories for *The Source* magazine in 1999. Her interviews and published work have appeared in *The International Review of African American Art*, *HYCIDE Magazine*, *UPTOWN*, *Ebony.com*, *Essence*, *The Ave* and various online and print media outlets. In 2004, she was a Senior Producer of the first National Hip Hop Political Convention held in Newark, NJ. Currently, shakur serves as an advocate for political prisoners, teaches yoga and meditation to heal trauma and anxiety, and works on programs and marketing at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art.

Lorna Dee Cervantes

Lorna is an award-winning Chicana, Native American (Chumash), feminist, activist poet who is considered one of the major Chicana poets of the past 40 years. She has been described by Alurista as “probably the best Chicana poet active today.” Lorna Dee Cervantes was born in 1954 in California. Her collections of poetry, *Emplumada*, *From the Cables of Genocide*, *Drive: The First Quartet* and *Ciento: 100 100-Word Love Poems* are held in high esteem and have attracted numerous nominations and awards. Lorna regularly gives poetry readings, workshops and guest lectures across the US. She was part of the Librotraficante Movement. The 2012 Librotraficante Caravan to Tucson was intended to smuggle books back into the hands of students, after they were boxed up and carted out of classrooms during class time, in order to comply with Arizona House Bill 2281. Lorna delivered a moving speech to the Movement’s supporters outside of the Alamo in March 2012.

S.T. Shimi

Shimi is a foxy brown performance artist who has been living and making work in San Antonio for two decades. Born and raised in Singapore, her theater work examines the intersections and contradictions of multiple identities in irreverent, provocative and visually intriguing ways. Some of her solo works include *Lost in Translation*, *Southern Discomfort* and *On the Island*, which was staged at the first National Asian American Theater Festival in 2007. She has created and collaborated on several original performance works over the years, including site-specific pieces, many of which have been selected for the San Antonio Express-News Annual Top Ten Theater Shows. She also collaborates with other artists on multi-media and movement experiences that have been seen around town, including several major local arts festivals, as well as stages around the country. Her eclectic dance background includes 15 years of training in American Cabaret-style bellydance, several years of training on aerial apparatuses such as tissu and pole, circus arts such as hoop and fire dance, and burlesque.

Shimi was on staff at Jump-Start Performance Co. for twenty years, much of which as the Artistic Director for the Company. She is also an arts educator and the coordinator of W-I-P, a long-running dance lab series. She has been facilitating discussions of new works using variations of Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Method in a variety of workshops, performance settings and at national arts conferences. She has served on the Executive Board of Alternate ROOTS, a service organization for artists and activists in the South, and as a representative to National Performance Network. She remains a company member with Jump-Start, and also teaches dance and performance at various studios in San Antonio. Shimi graduated from Dartmouth College with a degree in theater and women’s studies.

Seyi Adebajo

Seyi is a Queer gender non-conforming Nigerian media artist living in the South Bronx. As a media artist, Seyi raises awareness around social issues through digital video, multimedia photography and writing. Seyi’s work is the intersection of art, media, imagination, ritual and politics. The work is lyrical, telling stories with ingenuity/ritual/ words, while engaging people in trans-formative, political and spiritual dialogues. Seyi is an accomplished artist and has performed with Sharon Bridgforth and Cherry Muhanji. Seyi is currently a fellow with Queer/Art/Mentorship. Seyi has been an artist in resident with Allgo along with Maysles Institute, IFP and the City Lore Documentary Institute. Seyi is the recipient of the Pride of the Ocean LGBT Film Festival Grant and Hunter College’s Dean of Arts & Sciences Master’s Thesis Support Grant. Seyi’s short documentary *Trans Lives Matter! Justice for Islan Nettles* has screened as an Official Selection

2014 Leeway Transformation Award Panelists

of the 28th BFI Flare London LGBT Film Festival, the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival, Bronx Documentary Center and the Sydney Transgender International Film Festival. It has also screened at the Brooklyn Film Festival, Reel Sister of the Diaspora Film Festival, The Los Angeles Transgender Film Festival, and the Walker Art Center.

Yowei Shaw

Yowei is a freelance audio producer and public radio reporter based in Philadelphia. She's reported for WNYC's *Studio 360*, NPR's *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and *Weekend Edition Sunday*, PRI's *The World*, WHYY, and other outlets. Yowei has also worked as an associate producer with NPR's *Fresh Air with Terry Gross* and NPR's *World Cafe with David Dye*. She's received a National Journalism Award from Asian American Journalists Association and an Honorable Mention for Best Documentary award from Third Coast International Audio Festival. In 2011, she created Philly Youth Radio, a project that provided high school students with the tools and training to produce radio stories about their lives and communities.

Sage Crump (Facilitator)

Sage is a cultural strategist based in the US South who works to embed arts and culture into social justice movements. With over 20 years of arts and organizing experience, Sage works with artists and organizations to develop or refine the way they engage strategies for change. She has facilitated and been a member of local, regional, national and international panels dealing with art and social justice issues. Sage is a long time member of Alternate ROOTS and has served in multiple capacities including staff member, strategic planning chair and board president. She also serves on the National Advisory Board of Women of Color In the Arts, is vice chair for Art2Action and a board member for the Center for Media Justice. Sage is a founding member of Young African Writers Collective, Oyster Knife, Community Theatre Initiative, and is a performance poet and vocalist.