



Press Release

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The Kennedy Center Announces 2017 Recipients of The Kennedy Center/Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Awards

**10 Teachers from Across the United States Receive
National Award for Excellence**

Over \$710,000 Has Been Given to 71 Teachers in the Program's Seven Years

(WASHINGTON)—The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts announced the 2017 winners of the Kennedy Center/Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Awards—a series of annual grants which recognize American teachers by spotlighting their extraordinary impact on the lives of students. Ten teachers were selected in 2017 from a pool of nominations received through the Kennedy Center's [website](#). Award recipients each receive \$10,000 and are showcased, along with the former students they inspired, on a [website](#) dedicated to inspirational teachers. The awards, created by the Center in honor of Stephen Sondheim's 80th birthday in 2010, were initiated and funded through the generous support of Myrna and Freddie Gershon. To date, 71 awards totaling \$710,000 have been presented.

The teachers are: the late Evangeline "Lil" Blazakis of East Windsor, New Jersey; Adam Burns of Troy, Michigan; Suzanne Dukes of Chincoteague, Virginia; Norma Freeman of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Tara Hefner of Spotsylvania, Virginia; Dr. Suzanna McPhilomy of Alexandria, Virginia; Michael Mills of Kennewick, Washington; Iris Rinke-Hammer of Birmingham, Alabama; Dale Shields of Cleveland, Ohio; and Alice Duncan Thompson of Memphis, Tennessee.

In many people's lives there is at least one teacher who inspired and helped them become who they are today. Although the range of subjects and grade levels vary

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widely, these inspirational teachers have one thing in common: each has overwhelmingly impacted his or her students' lives and encouraged them to reach their potential. Quotes from nomination essays include: "He challenged us to look inward, confront ourselves, and find our voices."; "Bold and untethered by constructs which ruled libraries in the last millennium, stepping into the library with Ms. Duncan Thompson is like entering the magic school bus with Ms. Frizzle. There is a pure exuberance and energy that radiates from her like sunshine."; "She began classes with 10-minute meditations. We students sat on the rug, closed our eyes, and obeyed. I felt myself slip out of my awkward skin and become something else."

"Teachers define us," stated Stephen Sondheim. "In our early years, when we are still being formed, they often see in us more than we see in ourselves, more even than our families see and, as a result, help us to evolve into what we ultimately become. Good teachers are touchstones to paths of achieving more than we might have otherwise accomplished, in directions we might not have gone."

"The profound impact and difference that teachers can make on their students is immeasurable. We see this in schools across the country through our national outreach programs and are in awe of all that they achieve." said Mario Rossero, Senior Vice President of Education at the Kennedy Center. "The Kennedy Center/ Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Award is an incredible opportunity to recognize the passionate work teachers are doing to pass on the joy of learning for their students and communities."

Noted composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim frequently attributes his success to the teachers in his life. The Kennedy Center/Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Awards are presented each year around Sondheim's birthday—March 22—to a select group of teachers, kindergarten through college, who are nominated via the Kennedy Center [website](#). Nominators must be at least 18 years of age and have been a student of the nominee. Teacher nominees must teach or have taught in a K-12 school, college, or university in the United States. Teachers of all grade levels and subject

areas are eligible. A panel of judges reviews a pool of nominations and selects the recipients based on the power and quality of the nomination from their former students. Nominations for the 2018 cycle may be submitted beginning in September 2017.

Winner of the Special Tony Award® for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre, **Stephen Sondheim** has received more Tonys® than any other composer. Mr. Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics for *Saturday Night*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *The Frogs*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Sunday in the Park With George* (for which he received a Pulitzer Prize), *Into the Woods*, *Assassins*, *Passion*, and *Road Show*, as well as lyrics for *West Side Story*, *Gypsy* and *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, and additional lyrics for *Candide*. Revues of his work include *Sondheim on Sondheim*, *Side by Side by Sondheim*, *Marry Me a Little*, *You're Gonna Love Tomorrow*, and *Putting It Together* and *A Bed and a Chair*. For films and television, he composed the scores of *Stavisky* and *Reds* and wrote songs for *Dick Tracy*, for which he received an Academy Award®. He also received the Kennedy Center Honors in 1993. Mr. Sondheim is on the Council of the Dramatists Guild, having served as its president from 1973 to 1981.

Nominators for posthumous recognition of a teacher must designate a 501(c)3 organization or fund within a K-12 school, school system, college, or university in the United States to receive the \$10,000 award in the deceased teacher's name. To learn more about the Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Awards, please visit kennedy-center.org/sondheimteacherawards.

A full list of recipients and their nominating students is below.

TEACHER	CITY, STATE	NOMINATING STUDENT
Evangeline “Lil” Blazakis (Deceased)	East Windsor, New Jersey	Mary Valentine
Adam Burns	Troy, Michigan	Griffin Olis
Suzanne Dukes	Chincoteague, Virginia	Sheila Jones
Norma Freeman	Ann Arbor, Michigan	William Martinez
Tara Hefner	Spotsylvania, Virginia	Jeimy Alfaro
Dr. Susanna McPhilomy	Alexandria, Virginia	Kenneth Da Silva
Michael Mills	Kennewick, Washington	Shannon Houtrouw
Iris Rinke-Hammer	Birmingham, Alabama	Adriane Tharp
Dale Shields	Cleveland, Ohio	Nicole Brinkmann Reeves
Alice Duncan Thompson	Memphis, Tennessee	Jerry Ivery

About Education at the Kennedy Center

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts is the national champion for arts learning and creativity. Committed to increasing opportunities for all people to participate in, learn about, and understand the arts, [Education at the Kennedy Center](#) offers programs and events that strive to reflect the nation and communities and that are accessible and inclusive for all. From performances and exhibits on the Center’s stages and in the community, to classroom and community partnerships, including the recent addition of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities Turnaround Arts initiative, to online resources accessible nearly anywhere, the Center serves the burgeoning artist, the exploring student of any age, the teacher and teaching artist, and even the local and national infrastructure—any person interested in arts learning and utilizing the arts for positive change. As an essential component of the living memorial to President Kennedy, the Center’s Education utilizes the arts to embrace the ideals of service, justice, freedom, courage, and gratitude, and to activate and support the Citizen Artists in all our audiences. For more information, please visit kennedy-center.org/education/.

FUNDING CREDITS:

The Kennedy Center/Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Awards are made possible in their entirety by Myrna and Freddie Gershon.

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For more information about the Kennedy Center/Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Awards, please visit kennedy-center.org/sondheimteacherawards
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