

ALLIES IN ART

BCA bridges the arts-and-culture sector with the business community.

BY NANCY COHEN ISRAEL

“The Obelisk Awards is unique because it brings together the widest cross-section of arts-and-culture supporters in North Texas,” notes Katherine Wagner, CEO at Business Council for the Arts. The symbiotic relationship between the Dallas business community and its partnerships within the cultural sector is legendary. Celebrating its 35th year, the award recognizes the significant contributions of leaders in both those sectors. As Nancy Nasher, Founder’s Chair of BCA, states, “When business supports the arts, our cities, communities and workplaces are stronger and more vibrant.”

This year’s awardees in the arts include Dr. Harry Robinson, president and CEO of the African American Museum. “I never thought that I would be receiving an Obelisk Award let alone a Lifetime Achievement Award,” Robinson marvels. For nearly 50 years, he has helmed the museum into the institution that it is today. In the late 1980s—early 1990s, he oversaw the capital campaign that led to the construction of its current facility in Fair Park. “Once we decided what we wanted to do, the Dallas community came together to build this new building,” he says. Under Robinson’s leadership, the museum’s many achievements include its 46-year-old summer camp, its commitment to academic discourse, a robust exhibition calendar, and a vast collecting program.

While Lily Cabatu Weiss assumed the reins as executive director of the Dallas Arts District in 2016, her tenure in the area predated the cultural district itself. In 1978, she joined the faculty of the nascent Arts Magnet (now Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts), where she spent nearly four decades, shaping its dance conservatory into the nationally renowned program that it is today. “The most transformational moment on this incredible journey in the Arts District is directly related to surrounding myself with amazing leaders, like Rosann McLaughlin Cox, one of the founding leaders at the Arts Magnet/Booker T. Washington HSPVA,” she explains. She also cites her family, immigrants from the Philippines, as having a profound influence on her.

From her front-row seat, Weiss has watched the neighborhood transform from the Sasaki Plan, the original blueprint for an arts district drafted in 1983, through the evolution into its current 118-acre footprint. “One of the best things that I believe in is the idea of connectivity,” says Weiss, recognized as a Visionary Nonprofit Arts Leader. On her watch, the Dallas Arts District has become increasingly pedestrian-friendly, while programming both in and out of its physical buildings attracts the broadest swath of the city.

The BCA itself reflects the diversity of Dallas. Board member

Harry Robinson, president and CEO of the African American Museum, received BCA’s Lifetime Achievement Award. Photograph by Jesse Hornbuckle





Dallas Arts District executive director and CEO Lily Weiss was honored as this year's Visionary Nonprofit Arts Leader. Photograph by Jonathan Zizzo.

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—Katherine Wagner, CEO at Business Council for the Arts

Pamela Zeigler-Petty chaired this year's Obelisk Awards. "As the first African American in this position, she has brought new connections that advance BCA's diversity and mission success," Wagner states.

In broadening the narrative of the American experience, this past spring the Boeing Company, this year's honoree for New Initiatives, served as the sole sponsor for *The Continual Struggle: The American Freedom Movement and the Seeds of Social Change*. The exhibition, featuring Brian Washington's charcoal paintings chronicling the history of the civil rights movement, was on view at the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

Another connector in the city is UT Southwestern Medical Center. An honoree for Arts Partnerships, UTSW values the arts as a key component in healing. According to John Warner, MD, executive vice president for Health System Affairs and Health System CEO, "We hear from our patients and their families often about how much

they appreciate the art program at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital." Not only does the art provide a balm for its patients, but it also strives to support the local arts ecosystem through its insistence that over 50 percent of the work on its campus comes from regional artists and galleries.

UTSW also partners with area art museums to offer its students The Art of Observation. This elective course teaches the elements of art while offering instruction in empathy. It also offers tips to avoid the increasingly serious issue of burnout.

The November award luncheon is one of the ways in which BCA builds bridges. "In addition to the Obelisk Awards, another key program of BCA is Leadership Arts. This excellent trademarked program is for business professionals who wish to serve on nonprofit arts and culture boards of directors," says Wagner. Nominations for next year's Obelisk Awards open in January. **P**