



# Memorandum

**TO:** ARTS COMMISSION

**FROM:** Kerry Adams Hapner

**SUBJECT:** 2025 CORNERSTONE OF THE  
ARTS AWARDS

**DATE:** June 13, 2025

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Approved

*Kerry Adams Hapner*

Date

6/13/25

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## **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that the Arts Commission approve the selections for the 2025 Cornerstone of the Arts Award, Creative Impact Award, and Luminary Artist Award.

## **BACKGROUND**

Inaugurated in September 2013, through a partnership between the City of San José Office of Cultural Affairs and the Arts Commission, the Cornerstone of the Arts awards and event program was established.

The awards are bestowed annually at the Cornerstone of the Arts Event, during which Cultural Affairs grantees are also honored for their collective contributions. In 2024, the Community-Based/Business Support for the Arts Awards category is on hiatus as nominations have trended to be low since the inception. The new Luminary Artist Award will substitute for the Community-Based/Business Support for the Arts Award. The event is held in October and the program includes the following categories:

- **Cornerstone of the Arts Award;**
- **Creative Impact Award; and**
- **Luminary Artist Award**

Nominated by community members and Arts Commissioners, honorees are selected according to the following eligibility and criteria for each award category:

- **Cornerstone of the Arts Award** - An individual(s) or creative entrepreneur who has provided enduring and effective leadership and/or support that has led the betterment of San José's arts community and the quality of life for our citizens.

A. Eligibility

1. An individual or individuals (not an organization)
2. Working in any sector (nonprofit, public, or private)
3. Past honorees are ineligible.

B. Criteria

1. Significance
2. Innovation
3. Inclusiveness
4. Timing of Recognition

- **Creative Impact Award** - A cultural or artistic project or program that has made a significant impact on the community.

A. Eligibility

1. An individual or individuals from either the nonprofit, or business sector.
2. Produced a special cultural or artistic project or event that has significantly impacted the San José community.
3. Special cultural or artistic project or event does not have to be reoccurring.
4. Past honorees are ineligible.

B. Criteria

1. Significance of Project
2. Community Impact
3. Innovation

- **Luminary Artist Award** – Recognizes an established artist having a substantial body of work that reflects excellence and contributions to San José's cultural vitality.

a. Eligibility:

1. Artist must have lived or worked in San José for a minimal of five (5) years.
2. Artist must have contributed to the cultural enrichment in San Jose.
3. Past honorees are ineligible.

b. Criteria

1. Significance of Work
2. Community Impact

3. Collaboration

4. Innovation

2025 will mark the 12<sup>th</sup> year of the Cornerstone Awards. Previous Cornerstone Award recipients include the late Irene Dalis, founder of Opera San Jose, late Mayor Susan Hammer, founders of the Castellano Foundation Carmen and Al Castellano, founders of San José Taiko Roy and PJ Hirabayashi, founder and former Artistic Director of Teatro Visión Elisa Marina Alvarado, founder Randall King and Executive Director Cathleen King of the San José Stage Company, Artistic and Festival Director of San José Jazz Bruce Labadie; General Director of Symphony San José Andrew Bales and the late Dr. Jerrold Hiura (*posthumous*), Founder of Silicon Valley African Film Festival Chike Nwoffiah, former CEO of SVCcreates Connie Martinez, Sculptor Ken Matsumoto, and the late Rick Holden (*posthumous*).

The 2025 awards will be presented at the Cornerstone of the Arts event at the Hammer Theatre in October 2025. FY 2024-2025 City of San José Office of Cultural Affairs' grantees will also be recognized for their contributions to San Jose's cultural life.

## **ANALYSIS**

Applicants were asked to complete an online application by the deadline of May 9, 2025. The Cornerstone of the Arts application opportunity was promoted in the media and via Cultural Affairs website, social media, and through email. The Cornerstone of the Arts Nomination Guidelines were posted on the [Office of Cultural Affairs' website](#).

The 2025 Cornerstone of the Arts committee was comprised of the following past honorees and Arts Commissioners:

- Analyn Bones, *San José Arts Commissioner*
- Cathleen King, *Executive Director, San Jose Stage Company*
- De Anna Mirzadegan, *San José Arts Commissioner*
- Connie Martinez, *Founder and Senior Advisor of SVCcreates*
- Richard James, *Former San José Arts Commissioner*

The Committee met on June 13, 2025, to review seven nominations. All the nominations identified leaders that have made a significant impact on San José's cultural landscape. Each nomination was carefully reviewed against each award's eligibility and criteria. During the discussion for the Creative Impact Award, the panel highly recommended Chris Esparza (*posthumous*) to recognize his entrepreneurship and events that he has produced in the community before his death. After the deliberation, the Committee is recommending the following awards in 2025:

- Kevin Hauge, *Cornerstone of the Arts Award*
- Chris Esparza, *Creative Impact Award (posthumous)*
- Joe Miller, *Luminary Artist Award*

**Cornerstone of the Arts Honoree (selected excerpt from nomination)**

For more than half of Children’s Musical Theater San Jose’s (CMT) history, Kevin’s unparalleled artistic vision has led the organization to become a nationally recognized leader in youth theater and the longest thriving arts organization in Silicon Valley.

Kevin’s contributions have impacted thousands of young people and their families, shaping not just the cultural landscape of San José, but also countless individual lives. Through his unwavering commitment to inclusion and excellence, Kevin has created an artistic home where youth develop their talents, gain confidence, and realize their fullest potential — both on and off the stage. His legacy is a testament to the transformational power of the arts.

Over his three decades of leadership, Kevin has touched the lives of more than 150,000 young artists, directing more than 200 productions, and involving more than 1,000 youth performers each season. Thanks to Kevin’s vision, many of these students experience live theater for the first time — a moment that often sparks a lifelong connection to the arts. Kevin's artistic vision ensures that the arts are accessible to all, reaffirming the belief that creativity should have no barriers.

Under his guidance, CMT earned national acclaim, including 13 prestigious grants from the National Endowment for the Arts — a rare achievement, particularly for a youth-focused organization. Kevin's commitment to artistic excellence and innovation has elevated the standard for children's theater across the country. Yet, it is his compassionate leadership, mentorship, and dedication to nurturing young talent — performers, directors, choreographers, and designers alike — that truly set him apart. Kevin inspires those around him to dream bigger, work harder, and believe in themselves.

Always pushing boundaries while honoring the heart of live theater, Kevin introduced modern technologies and dynamic design elements to CMT’s productions, infusing a fresh, contemporary energy that made theater more accessible and exciting for today’s tech- savvy audiences. At the same time, he has upheld CMT’s founding values of inclusion, ensuring every young person — regardless of financial status, ability, or background — had a place on stage. In 1997, he launched CMT into a new era with a groundbreaking multimedia production of *The Who’s Tommy*. Since then, under his leadership, CMT has incorporated cutting-edge technologies such as short-throw projection, high-definition graphics, and early exploration of 3D mapping — innovations that brought Broadway-caliber production values to the local stage and firmly established CMT as a national leader in youth arts.

Beyond the technical realm, Kevin’s commitment to innovation also transformed the cultural environment through groundbreaking community engagement initiatives. He

launched *TADA (Theater for Digital Activity)*, an unprecedented program connecting CMT performers with terminally ill pediatric patients to co-create original musicals remotely — an initiative so impactful it became the subject of an Emmy-nominated PBS special. In 2016, Kevin further broke new ground by introducing the Bay Area’s first “Second Screen” experience during CMT’s production of *RENT*, allowing audiences to access live backstage streams, exclusive content, and real-time interaction via their mobile devices, redefining how audiences engage with live performance.

Through projects like TADA and the Second Screen, Kevin reimagined the possibilities of theater — using innovation not just to entertain, but to build empathy, foster inclusion, and strengthen community connections. His visionary leadership has left an indelible mark on San Jose’s cultural landscape, expanding both the reach and the role of youth theater in ways that will resonate for generations to come.

At the heart of Kevin’s leadership are two guiding principles that have shaped CMT’s identity. Kevin has always set a high bar for artistic achievement, believing deeply in the potential of every young performer who steps onto the stage. He challenges everyone to strive for their personal best, fostering a culture where hard work, commitment, and artistry are celebrated. In return, performers are embraced as part of something truly special — an artistic journey that often surpasses their own expectations and instills lifelong confidence.

Beyond the stage, Kevin has helped build vital partnerships that strengthen CMT’s role in the broader arts community. Through collaborations with organizations such as Apple, Adobe, NVIDIA, the Tech Museum of Innovation, Team San Jose, the San Jose Symphony, the San Jose Flea Market, Hammer Theater, and Broadway San Jose, Kevin has expanded CMT’s reach and impact across Silicon Valley. As CMT looks ahead to the next 50 years, we will carry forward Kevin’s vision — continuing to connect deeply with our community while providing the highest level of arts education and family entertainment the Bay Area has to offer.

Having led CMT through many challenges and accomplishments over the past 30 years, Kevin stands proudly as a true cornerstone of our local arts community. Through his vision and leadership, Kevin has transformed the possibilities of youth theater, right here in the heart of Silicon Valley. He has been a constant artistic model, setting a standard of excellence and inclusivity that others aspire to emulate.

*The Cornerstone of the Arts Committee is pleased to recommend Kevin Hauge as the recipient of this year’s Cornerstone of the Arts Award.*

**Creative Impact Honoree (selected excerpt from nomination)**

Chris Esparza was a gentle creative giant who continuously shaped downtown San Jose's arts, nightlife, and community events, leaving a mark on the city's identity. Born in San Jose, Chris

Esparza fostered a sense of adaptability and a deep understanding of community dynamics. After his graduations from Gunderson High School, Chris was exposed to a diverse array of musical genres and subcultures, igniting his passion for event production and community engagement.

In 1991, Chris co-founded Ajax Lounge with a business partner in downtown San Jose. Ajax Lounge became a cultural hub, hosting acts like The Fugees, The Roots, and Ben Harper. Following Ajax's closure, he opened Fuel 44, which later became the Blank Club. He also co-founded the Naglee Park Garage and Blackbird Tavern, further cementing his influence in the local nightlife scene.

In the early 2000s, Chris founded Giant Creative Services, a business management consulting firm that organized events like "Winter Wonderland." Through this platform, he launched Left Coast Live, a multi-day music festival that brought together over 500 musicians and 40 local businesses, revitalizing San Jose's live music scene.

In 2011, Chris became Community Development Director at the School of Arts & Culture at Mexican Heritage Plaza. Over the next 13 years, he transformed the Plaza into a vibrant center for cultural expression and community engagement. His leadership was instrumental in the development of La Avenida, San Jose's first cultural district, aimed at preserving and promoting the city's rich Latino heritage.

Chris's contributions extended beyond his professional endeavors; he was a beloved figure in the community, known for his generosity, vision, and commitment to San Jose. Chris passed away in August 2024 and is survived by his wife, Pilar, and daughter, Olivia.

*The Cornerstone of the Arts Committee is pleased to recommend Chris Esparza as the recipient of this year's Creative Impact Award.*

**Luminary Artist Award (selected excerpt from nomination)**

Joe Miller is the most prolific creator of opportunities in the arts. At Works/San José, he facilitates and oversees about 400 artist and performing opportunities each year.

Joe dove into the San José arts scene in 1987 volunteering as a designer for Works/San José. In 1990, after he helped move Works/San José to Japantown, Joe became a formal advisor to the Board of Directors and was asked to oversee all aspects of brand and promotion for the organization. He designed hundreds of innovative to outrageous "Works cards" for exhibits and events for artists and other organizations. His work in design for Works/San José and several other area arts organizations and nonprofits continues to this day.

When Joe moved from a designer and an Advisory Board member in 2008 when Works/San José was completely without funds and the prospects for survival were bleak. In 2010, Joe became the

President and worked with a new board to stabilize the organization. He also orchestrated Works/San José to move from Japantown to a space at the Convention Center in 2011. In the following years, Joe was responsible for rebuilding Works/San José from nearly no resources to more than \$350,000 in reserves and \$450,000 in overall assets.

Since relaunching Works/San José in 2011, Joe has become a master recruiter of new artists, and has guided the selection and installation of every exhibition. In 2011, the first three exhibitions in Works/San José at the Convention Center were “*Out of State*” with pictorial artists graduating from SJSU, “*Primer Paso*” with collaborating artists from Oaxaca and San José who practiced in traditions of street art, and “*Iraqimemorial*” with local to international artists proposing memorials for the thousands of Iraqi civilians killed in the war with U.S. and coalition forces. These first few unusual and diverse viewpoints on art and inviting participation of new artists are a hallmark of Joe’s leadership in continuing and expanding Works/San José mission.

During the first openings of COVID, Joe took on the reactivation of the Mexican Heritage Plaza gallery on his own by organizing and physically completing every aspect of the first exhibitions. His goal was to provide opportunities to East Side artists and expanding Works’ goal of inclusiveness.

While bringing Works/San José back to health from the brink, Joe fostered and facilitated programming that provides a platform for about 400 artists, poets, writers, and performers each year, and about 11,000 annual visitors in professionally organized spaces, where the demographics of participants reflects the evolving demographics of San José. Joe’s tireless work to bring new and underrecognized voices into our exhibit spaces includes many examples of institutional and group partnerships to individual mentoring and artistic encouragement. Against all odds, Joe has made Works/San José the grass roots marvel of San José—not just by survival but providing more opportunities across a broader spectrum of artists and communities than ever.

In 2021, Joe worked with Mosaic America and the School of Arts and Culture at Mexican Heritage Plaza to mount an exhibition coinciding with the Mosaic Festival. The reactivation of the gallery space at La Plaza launched a partnership to present two more exhibitions each year. After the murder of Jorge Floyd, Joe created a community art exhibition with video screens and projections along the Market Street side of the Convention Center. The online exhibit and corresponding installation, titled “For Mr. Floyd, Ms. Taylor” included activist art from more than 70 local artists, and projected the names of dozens of Black men and women killed by police while not posing a threat.

Joe Miller is watched and admired by young artists in our communities because he’s reached out and offered the opportunity to be seen and heard here in San José. It would be great to acknowledge that their attention to him and Works/San José is justified. This recognition would reinforce Works/San José as an innovative and essential part of the San José cultural landscape—

one to be nurtured and expanded in reach.

*The Cornerstone of the Arts Committee is pleased to recommend Joe Miller as the recipient of this year's Luminary Artist Awards.*

**PUBLIC OUTREACH**

The nomination guidelines were posted on the City's website and dispersed through the Office of Cultural Affairs' distribution lists. Announcements of the nomination guidelines were also made through social media.

/s/

KERRY ADAMS HAPNER  
Director of Cultural Affairs