



PUBLIC Humanities AWARDS

SEPTEMBER 23, 2026

HOME COURT *AT THE*
OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL CENTER

HUMANITIES HERO AWARD | MAYER | BROWN

MIKE MATEJKA

OFELIA GUERRA

BEACON AWARD RECIPIENT,
SUE ELEUTERIO

DANIEL KISSLINGER

DAMON WILLIAMS



Program Menu

Program

PHA Awardees

Auction

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IH Mission & Vision

Welcome to the 2026 Illinois Humanities Public Humanities Awards!

We are so glad you are here to join us in celebrating our honorees who represent communities across the state and have dedicated their time to preserving our stories, history, and culture.

Video

This is Illinois Humanities

WELCOME AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rikeesha Phelon, Board Chair, Illinois Humanities

Susan Manning, Board Vice Chair, Illinois Humanities

OPENING REMARKS

Gabrielle H. Lyon, Executive Director and CEO, Illinois Humanities

Humanities Hero Award Presentation

MAYER BROWN

Accepted by Joanna K. Horsnail, Chicago Office Managing Partner

DINNER

Beacon Award Presentation

SUE ELEUTERIO

Introduction—Gabrielle H. Lyon and 2020 PHA Honoree Sylvia Ewing

*Awardee Showcase and Public Humanities
Award Presentation*

DAMON WILLIAMS AND DANIEL KISSLINGER

*Introduction–Brian Johnson, Board Member and Jane Beachy,
Senior Director of Public Engagements*

MIKE MATEJKA

*Introduction–Julio Paz, Board Member and Fairouz AbuGhazaleh,
Director of Statewide Programs*

OFELIA GUERRA

*Introduction–Antoinette Burton, Board Member and
B.B. Cooper Browne, Grants Program Officers*

LIVE AUCTION

Chris Hensley

CLOSING REMARKS

Gabrielle H. Lyon and Rikeesha Phelon

PERFORMANCE - BALLET FOLKLORICO DE CHICAGO

*Featuring Isabella Bautista, Melanie Bautista, Esmeralda Castrejon,
Damian Giraldo, Nathan Guerrero, Aymar Jimenez, Elijah Peralta,
Melissa Rodriguez, Ayslin Romero, Lila Salabert,
Valerie Sancen, and Emilia Volk*

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Meet Our 2026 Award Recipients

MAYER BROWN | HUMANITIES HERO AWARD

MAYER
BROWN

Mayer Brown is a leading international law firm with offices across the globe, known for its integrated approach to complex legal and business challenges. Mayer Brown's Chicago office is the original and largest office of the firm. It is also one of the largest law offices in Chicago, with deep roots in the community and a prominent place in the city's history.

Founded in 1881, its lawyers have played a central role in Chicago's growth and governance, earning national recognition for excellence in corporate, finance, and litigation work. The office is equally distinguished by a long history of public service, civic leadership, and pro bono advocacy, reflecting a deep and enduring commitment to Chicago and its communities.

SUE ELEUTERIO | BEACON AWARD RECIPIENT



Susan Eleuterio is a professional folklorist, educator, and consultant to non-profits. Holding an MA in American Folk Culture/Museum Studies from the Cooperstown Graduate Program (SUNY/Oneonta) and a BA in English/Education from the University of Delaware, Eleuterio serves as an adjunct faculty member of Goucher College's Master's in Cultural Leadership and Management program. She teaches courses in Academic Writing; Organizing Communities: Advocacy, Activism and Social Justice, and Fundraising. She has conducted fieldwork and developed public programs, including exhibits, performances, folk arts education workshops, and residencies in schools, along with professional development programs for teachers, students, adults, and artists for schools, museums, arts education agencies, and arts organizations across the United States.

She was recently elected to the Board of Directors of the American Folklore Society and is the former Board Chair for Illinois Humanities. She also served as Co-Chair of the Chicago based Crossroads Fund Board of Directors. She currently serves as a board member of Lakeshore Public Media in Indiana.

Meet Our 2026 Award Recipients

SUE ELEUTERIO | BEACON AWARD RECIPIENT (CONTINUED)

Her review of the traveling exhibit, *Escaramuza, The Poetics of Home*, is published in the Journal of American Folklore, Spring 2026 and her review of *Whispers in the Echo Chamber: Folklore and the Role of Conspiracy Theory in Contemporary Society*, Jesse A. Fivecoate and Andrea Kitta, eds. is available in the current issue of *Folklore and Education*.

Eleuterio is the author of *Irish American Material Culture: A Directory of Collections, Sites and Festivals in the United States and Canada*, as well as essays in the *Encyclopedia of Chicago History*, the *Encyclopedia of American Folklore*, the *Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folklife*, *Ethnic American Food Today: A Cultural Encyclopedia*, "Statewide Models for Folk Arts in Education" in the *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, and a collaboratively written chapter: "Even Presidents Need Comfort Food; Tradition, Food and Politics at the Valois Cafeteria" in *Comfort Food, Meanings and Memories* (2017 University Press of Mississippi). Her chapter, "Pussy Hats: Common Ground at the Chicago Women's March" was published in 2020 in *Pussy Hats, Politics and Public Protest* (University Press of Mississippi).

In 2024, she co-created a strategic plan with Sherry Williams, ED of Bronzeville Historical Society, for the Lyles Station Historic Corporation in Indiana. She also served as a consultant in exhibit development, public programming, and K-12 curriculum for the Center for Folklore Studies at the Ohio State University's *Placemaking in Scioto County* project. She currently serves as the Board Treasurer for Southern Ohio Folklife and as Board Treasurer for KINDFOLK, a non-profit serving Indiana and Kentucky. Projects for Southern Ohio Folklife include providing professional development for teachers integrating student culture into the classroom.

She has served as co-chair of the American Folklore Society's (AFS) Media and Public Outreach Committee and is currently the co-convenor of the American Folklore Society's Women's Section. She co-authored the AFS Advocacy toolkit, which provides case studies and guidance for advocacy by folklorists, academics, and community members.

Meet Our 2026 Award Recipients

OFELIA GUERRA | PUBLIC HUMANITIES AWARDS RECIPIENT



Ofelia Guerra is the Founder and Executive Director of Ballet Folklórico de Chicago. She established the organization to create a space where her daughters and others in the community could celebrate and connect with their cultural roots and traditions.

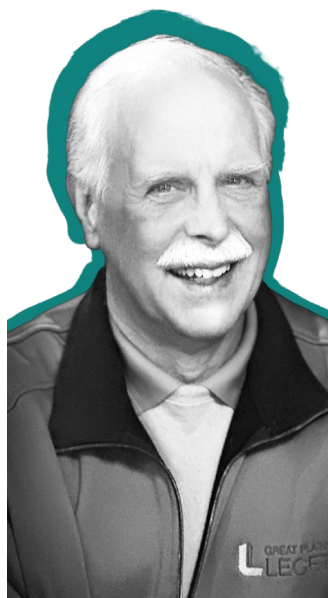
Under Ofelia's leadership, Ballet Folklórico de Chicago (BFC) has grown into an organization serving approximately 400 students by providing affordable, high-quality artistic instruction rooted in the Indigenous, African, and European influences that shape Mexican folkloric dance. Each year, BFC creates meaningful leadership opportunities for youth and has awarded 21 college scholarships to date.

Through the arts and humanities, Ofelia is committed to uplifting the community and inspiring future generations to embrace their heritage with pride.

Learn more about Ballet Folklórico de Chicago here:
<https://balletfolkloricodechicago.org/>

Meet Our 2026 Award Recipients

MIKE MATEJKA | PUBLIC HUMANITIES AWARDS RECIPIENT



Mike Matejka is an experienced Road Scholar, partner, and collaborator to Illinois Humanities. He is deeply invested in how public humanities connect the state and is always quick to offer his support when needed. He has been influential in connecting educators in Central Illinois to Illinois Humanities, is an engaged Envisioning Justice supporter and attendee, has been a Road Scholar, and has helped Illinois Humanities connect with State Representatives to bolster Government Relations Efforts.

Mike is a historian, writer, and community organizer with a passion for Illinois labor history and transportation. Mike is the President of the Illinois Labor History Society and serves on the boards of the McLean County Museum of History and Historic Pullman Foundation.

For 40 years, he edited the Grand Prairie Union News. He has written extensively on railroad and labor topics, plus curated seven exhibits at the McLean County Museum of History. His most recent exhibit is "Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" won an award from the American Association for State & Local History.

His books include *Bloomington's C&A Shops: Our Lives Remembered* (with Illinois Humanities Board Alum Greg Koos) about railroad repair shop workers and *Fierce Struggle: Illinois Fire Fighters Build a Union, 1935-1985*.

Mike served on the Bloomington City Council for 18 years and is co-chair of "Not In Our Town," a community anti-discrimination effort.

Meet Our 2026 Award Recipients

DAMON WILLIAMS AND DANIEL KISSLINGER | PUBLIC HUMANITIES



Daniel Kissinger (left) and Damon Williams

Damon Williams is a movement builder, organizer, hip-hop performing artist, educator and media maker from the south side of Chicago. He is the Co-Founder of Respair Production & Media, and the Co-Creator of AirGo, a weekly podcast in Chicago that reshapes culture for the more liberatory and creative. He is also the co-founder of the #LetUsBreathe Collective, an artistic activist organization birthed out of supply trips to support the Ferguson uprising in resistance to the murder of Mike Brown.

Daniel Kissinger is a Chicago-based host and producer who creates dialogue-based media showcasing the stories, voices, and artworks of communities challenging power, reconfiguring public life, and reimagining our world. He is the Co-Founder of RespairProduction & Media, and the Co-Creator of AirGo, a weekly podcast in Chicago that reshapes culture for the more liberatory and creative. Daniel has been the Executive Producer of the Poetry Foundation's acclaimed VS podcast, and editor of CTU Speaks!, a podcast produced by the Chicago Teachers Union. He also works as a consultant helping organizations, individuals, and companies build humanizing, subject-to-subject podcasts from scratch.

Together, the co-founded Respair Production and Media, a movement journalism and media organization that reshapes culture toward liberation. Rooted in Chicago, they build media projects about, in partnership with, and in support of communities challenging power, reconfiguring public life, and reimagining the world. From producing award-winning podcasts and films to supporting and advising collaborators across our ecosystem, they are building new media infrastructure for collective justice and liberation.

Learn more here: <https://www.respairmedia.com/> and <https://airgoradio.com/>

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Live Auction

Danny Lyon: The Bikeriders — “Scrambles Track, McHenry, Illinois”



Own a piece of Midwest photographic history from Danny Lyon, one of the most important American photographers of the last half century.

From 1963 to 1967, a young Danny Lyon rode with the Chicago Outlaws motorcycle club, immersing himself fully in their world to create *The Bikeriders*—a groundbreaking body of work described as “an attempt to record and glorify the life of the American bike rider.” *Scrambles Track, McHenry, Illinois* is one of the earliest images Lyon made in the series, captured at a motorcycle scramble. Using a Rolleiflex loaned to him by legendary Art Institute of Chicago curator Hugh Edwards, Lyon leaned behind a snow

fence to capture this now-classic landscape of riders emerging from the woods. *The Bikeriders* was first published in 1968 and has since been reissued three times, most recently inspiring the **major 2023 feature film** of the same name directed by Jeff Nichols.

This lot offers a **signed archival silver print** of *Scrambles Track, McHenry, Illinois*, printed in 2010 by Lyon’s longtime friend and printer Chuck Kelton, under the artist’s supervision. The winner will also receive a **copy of *The Bikeriders***, Lyon’s landmark photobook, personally signed by the artist.

Lyon has long been considered one of America’s most original and influential documentary photographers, pioneering an immersive ‘New Journalism’; approach to image-making. He has been the subject of major exhibitions at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Donated by: Danny Lyon

Value: \$5,000

Live Auction

An Exclusive Experience at the Music Box Theater



Opened in 1929, the Music Box Theatre is one of the country's great surviving neighborhood movie palaces and a beloved Chicago cultural landmark. Independently owned and operated, the Music Box is a nationally celebrated destination for classic, independent, foreign, and cult cinema—and one of only a handful of theaters in the country equipped to present film in spectacular 70mm.

This one-of-a-kind package invites you and your guests behind the scenes for a private, experience at the Music Box.

Your experience includes:

- **A private projection booth tour for up to 8 guests.** Go behind the scenes with a Music Box projectionist and see firsthand the equipment that allows the theater to screen everything from archival 16mm and classic 35mm prints to large-format 70mm film and contemporary digital cinema. Projection booths are small, so keeping the group small allows for a more in-depth tour—bring all your pressing cinema questions!
- **A private screening for up to 60 guests** in the Music Box's intimate 60-seat screening room — the same room used by filmmakers to view dailies and by critics to preview new releases. Choose a film that has shaped you, challenged you, or simply brought you joy, and share it with the people who matter most to you.
- **A special introduction from a Music Box programmer**, setting the stage for your chosen film (subject to availability and film selection).
- **A \$250 Music Box concessions credit** to enjoy popcorn, drinks, and snacks from the theater's concession stand before or during your screening.
- **A one-year Dual Membership to the Music Box**, an annual complimentary ticket, discounted tickets and concessions, free popcorn and soda refills, discounted Music Box beer and wine, invitations to member-only screenings, and discounts at Music Box partner restaurants.
- **A custom Music Box merchandise goody bag**—a curated set of one-of-a-kind Music Box swag (shirt sizes to be collected from winner).

This unforgettable experience celebrates film as both an art form and a communal experience, at one of Chicago's most treasured cultural institutions.

Donated by: Music Box, Hoopla Communications Value: \$1,500

Terms & Conditions

- The winner will be connected with the Music Box's Special Events Manager to schedule their tour and screening. Available dates are provided at the discretion of the theater, based on the regular film schedule—typically offered in rolling batches starting about two months out.
- Private rentals are generally scheduled on weekdays before 3:00 PM, weekday evenings (with a separate daytime tour), or weekend mornings. Evening screenings are limited to a 2-hour runtime; daytime weekday screenings may accommodate longer films.
- Package must be redeemed within one (1) year of the event date, subject to availability and coordination with Music Box staff.

Live Auction

An Evening in Conversation: A Private Dinner with Amanda Williams & Gabrielle H. Lyons



Gather eight guests for an extraordinary evening exploring the humanities, art, and Illinois' place in the American story—co-hosted by acclaimed artist and architect Amanda Williams and Illinois Humanities' Gabrielle H. Lyon.

Williams is one of the most influential voices working at the intersection of art, race, and public space, best known for her landmark *Color(ed) Theory* series and for *Other Washingtons*, her

ongoing exploration of the many places across the country named for the nation's first president—and what those names reveal about American identity, memory, and power. A 2022 MacArthur "genius" grantee, Williams' work is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Lyon has led Illinois Humanities since 2019, guiding the statewide organization's work to make history, heritage, and civic dialogue accessible in every corner of Illinois. A historian by training with a PhD in Education, she is the founding executive director of Project Exploration and author whose titles include *No Small Plans* and *Washington By and By*. Lyon was appointed by Governor Pritzker to chair the Illinois America 250. Commission leading the community-centered design of the statewide commemoration.

Your evening will feature a **chef's five-course tasting menu with paired wines from Limelight**—our 2026 Public Humanities Award catering partner—alongside a facilitated conversation led by Lyon with Williams as guest of honor. Together, they'll dig into the ideas behind *Other Washingtons* and how it connects to the broader storylines running through Illinois. Don't miss this chance to deepen your connection to the humanities and to the artists shaping how we understand our shared history, all in the comfort of your own home.

Donated by: Amanda Williams, Gabrielle H. Lyon, The Revel Group
Value: Priceless

Terms & Conditions

- Reserve: \$6,500
- Dinner will be served at the winner's private residence. Date and time must be mutually agreed upon with Limelight Catering and coordinated separately with the guest speaker's availability no sooner than January 2027.
- Not valid during the months of June or December.
- Must be redeemed by November 30, 2027.

Live Auction

A Portugal Wine Discovery: Wine Tasting and Getaway for Two



Discover the charm of ancient Porto—a city of enduring beauty, where winding cobblestone streets lead past colorful riverside facades and centuries of history unfold at every turn. Set along the Douro River, Porto is the birthplace of world-renowned Port wine, and this trip invites two travelers to experience it in full: intimate tastings, scenic vineyard valleys, vibrant cuisine, and the iconic bridges and azulejo-tiled architecture that make the city unforgettable.

This package includes **five nights** for two guests at a stylish boutique hotel in the heart of Porto, along with a guided **3-hour walking wine tour**, featuring tastings of Porto's renowned Port wines through the city's historic neighborhoods.

Your Portugal adventure begins before you even leave home, with a **private pre-departure wine class and tasting for six to orient you in the wine and cuisine of Portugal**, hosted by wine educator and sommelier Erin Drain. Gather your friends and take a sneak peek at the best of what Portugal has to offer: the class includes a **curated package of Portuguese goodies**, including olive oil, tinned fish, and tabletop items, to ground a taste of the trip before you depart. Portuguese pronunciation tips and tricks included!

Once in Portugal, you'll travel to the nearby Douro Valley for a complimentary wine tasting at Quinta dos Murças in Covelinhas—an unforgettable afternoon among the terraced vineyards that define this storied wine region..

Donated by: Erin Drain

Value: \$4,500

Terms & Conditions

- Travel dates must be mutually agreed upon and are subject to availability.

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About Illinois Humanities

OUR MISSION

Illinois Humanities is a statewide nonprofit organization that activates the humanities through free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities that spark conversation, foster reflection, build community, and strengthen civic engagement for everyone in Illinois.

OUR VISION

An Illinois where the humanities are central to making the state more just, creative, and connected.

Founded in 1974, we are the state partner for the National Endowment for the Humanities and supported by state, federal, and private funds. We provide free, high-quality humanities experiences throughout Illinois, particularly for communities of color, individuals living on low incomes, counties and towns in rural areas, small arts and cultural organizations, and communities highly impacted by mass incarceration.

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