

RISE 
san diego



ILIA AWARDS

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP IN ACTION AWARDS



MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AT THE SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART
1649 EL PRADO, SAN DIEGO, CA 92101

OCTOBER 12, 2026

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS & PARTNERS!



Emerald Isle Golf Course

Georges at the Cove

Maya's Cookies

The MK LAB

Moonlight Stage Productions

Movement Matters Collective

The Nonprofit Institute at the University of San Diego

Pacific Arts Movement

PRP Wine International

Rancho Guejito Vineyard

The Riviera Supper Club and Turquoise Room

San Diego College of Continuing Education

San Diego Foundation

San Diego Japanese American Citizens League

2026 ILIA AWARDS PROGRAM

— 5:00 PM —

Registration
Reception and Networking
Performance by **ASHAA TAKOOK BIRD SINGERS**

— 6:15 PM —

Program Begins
Performance by **DANZA AZTECA**

— 6:30 PM —

Indigenous Peoples' Day Welcome by **LAUREN J. MAPP**

Welcome Poem by **LEAH GOODWIN**

Board Chair Welcome by **SALINA VILLEGAS**

CEO Welcome by **DOMINIC PORTER**

Collective Resilience Advocate Award

Next-Gen Influencer Award

Restorative Practitioner Award

Poetry Tribute by **KENDRICK DIAL**

Viet Mai Activist Award

Community Change Agent Award

Culture Shifter Award

Organization for Change Award

Anthony M. Medina People's Champion Award

Legler Benbough Legacy Award

Closing Remarks

Performance by **GEMINELLE**

— 8:30 PM —

Program Ends

CEO WELCOME BY DOMINIC PORTER

October 12, 2026

As we gather to celebrate another year of the Inclusive Leadership in Action Awards (ILIA), I find myself reflecting on a whirlwind of mixed emotions and thoughts. This year has presented us with a myriad of challenges and opportunities to shift and reimagine. As an organization, RISE San Diego has solidified our commitment to community, respect, and representation for those most in need. RISE was created as a collective dream and an investment in the vibrancy of San Diego through restoration, transformation, and shared elevation. Today, we continue to honor and celebrate that vision to uplift culture and community throughout our region.

From our inception, RISE has been adaptive: shifting to meet the changing needs of our neighborhoods and organizations. What started as community gatherings centered around critical and authentic conversations on contemporary issues, pivoted to nonprofit training designed to intentionally grow and sustain community-powered organizations; it expanded to building programs that deconstructed and reframed the application of leadership beyond formalities, titles, identities, and roles; evolved into co-curating spaces for creatives, artists, and communities that elevated art as an essential embodiment and reflection of our interconnectedness; and transformed into a reimagining of what spaces of psychological safety, socio-emotional support, mental wellness, and physical empowerment could be for nonprofit professionals navigating complex and uncertain times.

Throughout the shifts, the essence of our work has remained unchanged: to see, support, invest in, hold space for, co-create with, and reflect the rich tapestry of individuals that calls San Diego home. This journey has not been without its missteps and challenges, but it has continued to be rooted in authenticity and intention. Even now, as organizations like ours face unprecedented challenges, we are relentless in our commitment to our shared humanity.

This year, RISE graduated eighteen Leadership fellows and sixteen youth leaders, and welcomed twenty-one new leaders into our program. We held powerful RISE Arts Talks on topics such as the role of arts and social justice in mental health awareness and the creative youth economy, facilitated a capacity building workshops series specifically for artists and creatives, and launched our inaugural Resilience & Renewal program to support the wellness of our nonprofit colleagues working to support our communities throughout San Diego.

As we gather this evening to honor our remarkable nominees, we reflect on their significant contributions to their respective communities. This event transcends mere recognition—it celebrates and serves as a reminder of the bonds that unite us. Together, let's commit to deepening our connections and supporting one another in our journeys, amplifying the voices striving for positive change, and reaffirming our dedication to a more inclusive and compassionate world.

I extend heartfelt gratitude to our sponsors who believe in RISE's purpose and recognize that our greatest gift to this region is our community. Thank you to those who have answered the call to walk in partnership with us as we advocate for the upliftment of our neighborhoods, organizations, and county.

Now, more than ever, we must embrace the power of community and collectivism. By seeing the humanity in one another, we reaffirm our belief in each other's dignity and demand the respect we all deserve. As an organization, we are committed to continuing to invest in our people, our culture, and our collective wellbeing.

Thank you for your unwavering support! Let's move forward together, united in our mission to ignite change and build a brighter future for all.

In Lak'ech Ala K'in,


Dominic Porter

RISE san diego

ABOUT US

Our **MISSION** is to elevate and advance urban leadership through dialogue-based civic engagement, dynamic nonprofit partnerships, and direct training and support to increase the capacity of urban residents to effect meaningful community change.

Our **VISION** is thriving, resident-led urban neighborhoods providing safe and healthy opportunities for youth and families to live, work, and play.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leveraging adaptive leadership frameworks, group relations theory, and cultural competency to empower leaders to tackle seemingly complex challenges within and alongside their communities.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Fostering critical and authentic dialogue and resident-led action around issues impacting urban communities throughout San Diego County.

TRAINING

Strengthening nonprofits, social enterprises, minority-led small businesses, and regional organizations through DEIA consultation, technical assistance, capacity-building training, and strategic partnerships.

RISE ARTS

Nurturing, advocating, and amplifying the intersection of arts and social justice in San Diego to support artists and emerging organizations with roots in communities of color.



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The **RISE URBAN LEADERSHIP FELLOWS PROGRAM** (RULFP) focuses on the personal and professional development of each Fellow through intensive forums, the development and implementation of a self-selected community project, and coaching and peer learning throughout the fellowship year. Through an adaptive leadership approach that requires active engagement and deep reflection, fellows are offered the next phase of their development and training, enabling them to lead more effectively in the face of the complex, contentious, and seemingly intractable challenges present in their communities.



ON THE RISE (OTR) uses leadership development strategies to create meaningful experiences for high school students from underserved communities that empower and inspire them to participate in social change. Through OTR, students acquire a higher level of self-awareness, understand the relationship between their past and their future, identify an issue that they are passionate about, connect the issue to a movement or cause and build a network of meaningful connections. These outcomes culminate in the development of a CAPstone (Community Action Project) plan along with a personal narrative that explores their personal story, leadership experience, community issues, and their action plan.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The **COMMUNITY IMPACT SHOWCASE** is a public presentation of community-driven projects and programs designed and/or further developed in the RISE Urban Leadership Fellows Program and the Nonprofit Partnerships Training program. The annual showcase features a collection of project exhibits and a judged pitch competition for project funding.



The **INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP IN ACTION AWARDS (ILIA)** celebrates the work of individuals and organizations throughout San Diego County who are dedicated to the ideals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Since 2017, RISE has sought nominations from the community of individuals and organizations that are doing the work to make a real difference in the San Diego region. Award honorees are selected from these nominations and announced each October at the RISE ILIA Awards event.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

RISE NOW is a virtual program that captures important solution focused conversations relevant to urban communities in the now. The facilitated dialogues are designed to highlight the issues and needs of impacted community members and identify solutions from those actively engaged with their communities. RISE Now is centered around emerging leaders who are leaning into the work of real systemic change.



NONPROFIT TRAINING & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE supports small nonprofits and minority-owned businesses throughout the county to attain sustainability and achieve growth through training and hands-on technical assistance that aim to reduce barriers to business success. RISE cultivates the role of participating businesses in becoming models for equitable workforce principles and serving as a pipeline for employment, economic development, and resident leadership within the communities they serve.

RISE ARTS

CAPACITY-BUILDING TRAINING workshops and technical assistance cohorts for individual artists and smaller arts and culture groups and nonprofits that are seeking to build business skills and knowledge critical to their sustainability and growth. These opportunities are designed to offer learning spaces for growth, networking, and collaboration.



COMMUNITY ART TALKS developed in collaboration with local artists and cultural practitioners. The series focuses on the intersection of arts, culture, and social justice and is grounded in shared learning, advocacy, equity, and representation, and visibility in the arts.

STAFF & BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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AWARD CATEGORIES

COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE ADVOCATE

Honors an individual who has shown dedication and action to address and support a community's ability to come together to combat or resist adverse circumstances. It recognizes the work of fostering adaptation, growth, and resiliency within communities to more readily respond to and recover from problems together.

NEXT-GEN INFLUENCER

Honors an individual between the ages of 16 and 25. It recognizes the voices of young adults who have shown dedication and action within their communities and are growing into their roles as action-driven thought leaders.

RESTORATIVE PRACTITIONER

Honors an individual who has shown dedication and action in fostering spaces of healing and compassion for others. It recognizes the commitment to restorative practices delivered with grace, empathy, and a strong ethic of care in support of diverse community groups.

VIET MAI ARTIVIST AWARD

Honors an individual who has leveraged their platform as an artist or cultural practitioner to bring awareness and progress to community or social justice issues to bring about impactful change. The award is named in honor of the late Mr. Viet Mai, a RISE Urban Leadership Fellow ('19), an award-winning poet, educator, and community advocate, who founded vKnowledge Collective; a collaborative community consulting network designed to impact Education and Mentorship, Health and Wellness, and Social Entrepreneurship.

COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENT

Honors an individual who has shown dedication and action to make real, sustainable, and systemic change through the creation of innovative programs, policy, platforms, or partnerships. It recognizes the work of assisting the community's ability to thrive in areas such as education, social enterprise, health and wellness, or advocacy.

AWARD CATEGORIES

CULTURE SHIFTER

Honors an individual who has shown dedication and action in shifting the culture of organizations and communities alike. It recognizes the effort of guiding groups to face a new challenge, disrupt outdated or harmful norms, and become more reflective and responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

ORGANIZATION FOR CHANGE

Honors an organization that has shown dedication and action to confronting challenges and spearheading opportunities to support and uplift San Diegans in meaningful and impactful ways. It recognizes the efforts of organizations and their teams to deliver exceptional programming and services for the communities they serve.

ANTHONY M. MEDINA PEOPLE'S CHAMPION

Honors an individual who has been an advocate and champion for under-served or marginalized communities. It recognizes advocacy in words and in action to bring about meaningful change for the people. The award is named in honor of the late Anthony M. Medina, a RISE Urban Leadership Fellow ('18) and ILIA award recipient ('19), who founded People's Legal Services to provide free and low-cost legal support to underserved communities.

LEGLER BENBOUGH LEGACY AWARD

An internally nominated and selected award, this honors an individual or organization/group whose commitment to the community is represented in both its deeds and words. It recognizes those that actively and continuously support organizations and community groups leaning into the work of systemic change in communities across San Diego County. The award is named in honor of the Legler Benbough Foundation, which believed in RISE by providing seed funding to grow the organization and has continued to be one of its strongest supporters.

AND NOW PRESENTING...

2026 ILIA AWARD NOMINEES

2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES



DILKHWAZ AHMED

Dilkhwaz Ahmed is the Founder and Executive Director of License to Freedom, a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving refugee, immigrant, and underserved communities throughout San Diego County. Originally from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, she is a lifelong advocate for women's rights and survivors of domestic violence. Before immigrating to the United States in 2002, she led a women's shelter in Iraq, providing counseling, advocacy, and support to women experiencing abuse. Since co-founding License to Freedom in 2003, Dilkhwaz has helped thousands of individuals and families access safety, healing, and opportunity through culturally and linguistically responsive services.

RISA BELL

Risa Bell, A surfer, Diver and ocean conservationist is also the Executive Director and Founder of Paddle for Peace. She draws from her multicultural experiences and is driven by a zest for life and a commitment to diversity in outdoor spaces. Her upbringing fuels her passion for creating healing and transformative experiences for underserved communities at the ocean. She doesn't just advocate for change, she builds programs, creates access, and makes space for others who have been historically excluded. Her work with Paddle for Peace isn't just about bringing people to the ocean, it's about shifting systems, fostering belonging, and ensuring future generations see nature as a place of healing and peace.



ALEJANDRA M. CHAIDEZ

Alejandra María Chaidez is a transfronteriza shaped by her parents' immigrant journey and their values of resilience, service, compassion, and justice. Her lived experience navigating visible and invisible borders fuels her commitment to belonging through her work with the County of San Diego. Drawing strength from communities that embraced her, she leads with honesty, love, and intention. A lifelong learner, her work spans global disability advocacy, County equity initiatives, and co-creating the Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE) Racial Equity Evaluation Framework.

RONALD PRESTON CLARK

Ronald Preston Clark is a compassionate, transparent, and relentlessly curious educator, writer, and mentor from San Diego. Shaped as much by his failures as his successes, he openly uses his own mistakes to teach accountability, resilience, and self-awareness. An award-winning author and Hampton University graduate, Clark is devoted to helping Black boys and young men discover the transformative power of literacy, purpose, and authentic leadership.



2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES

PAM COVARRUBIAS

Pam Covarrubias is a leadership coach and speaker who helps first-generation Latina leaders build certainty over confidence. Since 2018 she's provided no-cost business consulting to San Diego small business owners through the SBDC, and she volunteers as Finance Chair on the board of the Chicano Federation of San Diego County. For ten years she has hosted Cafe con Pam, a bilingual podcast amplifying first-generation voices. She's a lifelong hiker and dog mom to Thor and Bennie.



SOFIA MYABEL CUEVAS

Sofia Cuevas, 17, is a youth leader and youth mentor with Paddle for Peace, a nonprofit with a mission to diversify the coast. Driven to amplify that impact, she believes everyone deserves a space of healing and strives to be a voice for those who can't speak up. A poetry writer with a passion for sports and music, Sofia knows she's one of a kind and always aims to stay one step ahead.

JOHN W. EDWARDS III

John W. Edwards III is the founder of Better Cuts Male Health Alliance (BCMHA) and a licensed barber and therapist. His work is centered on helping men and boys better understand what they are experiencing, find the language to communicate it, and recognize what support can look like for them in spaces they already know and trust. By bringing together barbering, social work, and community engagement, he has trained more than 100 barbers, developed barbershop-based programs, and launched a Mobile Health Access Van that brings support directly into San Diego communities.



BRANDON FLOWERS

Brandon Flowers is an artful humanitarian/philanthropist, natural born leader, and the founder of The gARTen, an all arts encompassing Network of creatives using their gifts to leave a positive impact on the community. Awarded California State Assembly's Outstanding Achievement In Arts Award in 2025 for curating progressive events, he continues to curate and organize festivals and exhibits for San Diego's colorful array of talented artists, most notably in The Black Arts & Culture District (The Mental Bar, The Block Club). He tends to all demographics and age groups with events such as Story Time with the elders, servicing mental wellness with Peace & Paint, and building the resume of young males through an ongoing Mentorship (2 years) with Our Kings Nonprofit.

2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES



CYNTHIA DENISE GILLIAM

Cynthia Denise Gilliam is a longtime community leader, youth advocate, and champion for education, peace, and service in San Diego. A faithful member of St. Stephen's Cathedral Church of God in Christ since 1986, Cynthia has dedicated decades to creating opportunities for young people and strengthening her community. Through her work with Kids for Peace, Southeast Chapter, Cynthia has helped empower youth through programs focused on peace, leadership, and civic engagement. She has also organized initiatives supporting student success, including after-school programs, youth advocacy efforts, and opportunities for students to engage with elected officials.

KARRIE "ERIK'S MOTHER" GONZALES

Karrie Gonzales is a compassionate advocate whose life has been shaped by profound loss, personal resilience, and an unwavering commitment to helping others. Following the devastating loss of her son Erik to fentanyl poisoning, Karrie transformed her grief into purpose by dedicating herself to raising awareness about the dangers of fentanyl and the devastating impact it continues to have on individuals, families, and communities. Karrie's journey is deeply personal. Before becoming an advocate, she experienced the challenges of addiction firsthand. She understands the stigma, pain, and isolation that often accompany substance use disorder because she lived through it herself. Her recovery is a testament to her strength, determination, and belief that healing is possible.



KIMBERLY GRADY

Kimberly Grady is Executive Director of Think Dignity, San Diego's nonprofit serving people experiencing homelessness since 2006. She returned to San Diego in late 2024 to lead the organization, bringing 20+ years of nonprofit leadership. A San Diego native, Grady served as Vice President of Community Development for San Diego Community Housing Corporation for 22 years, managing a full staff, writing grants, and cultivating relationships to meet multi-million-dollar annual fundraising goals. She has also served on multiple boards, including the Southwestern College Foundation.

NYISHA GREEN-WASHINGTON

Nyisha Green-Washington is a San Diego-based organizer advancing health equity and racial justice. In 2017, she founded March for Black Womxn in San Diego (M4BWSD), leading marches for reproductive rights and protection from state violence. A former full spectrum doula, she works with Breast Cancer Prevention Partners, whose mission is preventing breast cancer by eliminating toxic chemical exposures. She also owns Give Light Aquatics, teaching swim lessons to combat high drowning rates among Black and POC people.



2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES

DENNISE JUÁREZ AGUILAR

Dennise Juárez Aguilar is a first-generation scholar pursuing a Master of International Affairs, specializing in development and nonprofit management. A passionate community advocate and active volunteer, she fights for education equity, resource access, and youth empowerment across the San Diego-Baja region. Through her service with County District 1, the Regional Chamber, and local mentorship programs, Dennise uplifts first-gen students and builds strong, equitable neighborhoods.



CAMILLE GRACE KELLY

Camille Grace Kelly (She/Her) is a Queer Licensed Psychotherapist and Co-Founder of SolPath Counseling & Holistic Wellness. She has over 15 years of experience as a therapist and community leader. Camille's approach is rooted in a deep understanding of how cultural and historical forces shape our beliefs around love and relationships. Her work seeks to untangle these layers of conditioning and offer individuals and couples the tools to create more liberated, intentional connections. Camille Co-founded SolPath Wellness as a BIPOC and Queer-affirming space to provide mental health and holistic wellness. She is also a trained priestess who has led a women's temple for the past six years, and a mother to two young daughters.

NATALIE LEGERRETTE

Natalie LeGerrette is the Executive Director of La Causa Service Clubs of San Diego County (LCSC), an organization she has called home since the fifth grade. A lifelong Causista turned nonprofit leader, Natalie brings deep institutional knowledge, a genuine connection to the communities LCSC serves, and a clear vision for what comes next. She leads a talented team committed to equipping young people with the leadership skills to meet the causes of tomorrow, whatever they may be.



LAURIE MAGULAC, MSW

For over 25 years, **Laurie Magulac** has invested in assessing community needs and developing solutions for families facing structural and systemic barriers to wellbeing. As a public school teacher and AVID Coordinator in 2001, she collaborated with immigrant families and secured grants to provide their students access to computers and snacks while caregivers worked in the evening. As she raised her older two daughters with developmental and medical disabilities, Laurie encountered biases and systemic barriers to their access to community and care. She trained as a life coach, wrote books and still leads connection groups to empower the caregiving community as they navigate inequitable social, health, and public services systems.

2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES



ALEJANDRO MARTINEZ

Alejandro Martinez is a community organizer at Mid-City CAN currently working to end youth incarceration. His background involves over a decade of experience within the Juvenile Court and Community School district working with multiple organizations throughout those years such as The AjA Project, Outdoor Outreach and Outside the Lens. Using lived experiences as valid forms of knowledge, Martinez believes in the storytelling process to heal and rewrite the identities many times placed on us by what bell hooks called “a white supremacist patriarchal imperialist capitalist” society.

TEMA MERCADO

Tema Mercado is a Xicana Licensed Midwife (LM, CPM) who founded La Matriz Birth Services, the first bicultural Latina midwifery practice in San Diego County. Now marking 10 years in practice, she founded Monarch Midwives, a 501(c)(3) investing in midwives of color and working toward opening a birth center in Barrio Logan. She directs Unveiling the Journey, a mentorship program in its 6th year with 100+ graduates, teaches in midwifery schools worldwide, and leads through reproductive justice and decolonial care.



MAYTE MERCADO

Mayte Mercado is a second year at USD majoring in Political Science. She is a dedicated youth in her community of City Heights. She has been a performer for Fern street circus and now serves the students as a teaching assistant and interns at the coherent development research institute doing community engagement work.

NICOLE MILNER, MPH, EMBA

Nicole Milner is a visionary leader known for building organizations, solving complex challenges, and creating meaningful community impact. As an operations executive, nonprofit consultant, and Co-Founder of Black Women Adventures, she leads with strategy, innovation, and purpose. Combining expertise in business and public health through her Executive MBA and MPH, Nicole develops solutions that strengthen organizations and empower communities.



2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES

COURTNEY OCHI

Courtney Ochi is the Senior Director at Thrive, where she empowers educators to reimagine what school can be for both students and adults. A former teacher, dean, and principal, she has spent over a decade committed to building and sustaining equitable school systems and transformative design. Courtney is currently pursuing a PhD in Education for Social Justice at USD.



MIYU ODA-DESHOTELS

Miyu Oda-Deshotels is the Constituent Affairs & Operations Manager for San Diego County Supervisor Joel Anderson, where she leads constituent services, community outreach, and cross-agency initiatives that improve access to government resources. She is also a grant writer supporting nonprofits serving children and families. Miyu is passionate about expanding opportunity, advancing equity, and building partnerships that create lasting impact throughout the community.

ASHLEY ORDAZ

Ashley Ordaz is a proud Afro-Cuban student leader, advocate, and bilingual Spanish speaker dedicated to empowering young people. Guided by her personal motto, "Time is limitless, so speak your words forever," Ashley believes every voice has the power to create lasting change. She pours into all of her work by amplifying student voices and creating opportunities that empower others to lead with confidence and purpose. Ashley most recently served as the Student Trustee for the San Diego Unified School District, representing more than 90,000 students. In this role, she took on topics focused on equity, communication, nutrition, environmental sustainability, and student engagement while ensuring student voices were included in district decision-making.



ANGEL PIPPINS-LOPEZ

Angel Pippins-Lopez is a proud queer Latino and community planning practitioner who helps residents shape their neighborhoods. As Transportation & Planning Program Manager at City Heights CDC, he advances safer streets, better transit, and community-led development by connecting complex planning processes to local priorities and lived experience. His work makes planning more accessible and gives residents a meaningful role in directing local investment and deciding how their communities grow.

2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES



JANICE LUNA REYNOSO

Janice Luna Reynoso is a Chicana raised in National City and Southeast San Diego, on Kumeyaay land. Shaped by her family's farming heritage, ties to Baja, and Indigenous values, she serves as Executive Director of Mundo Gardens, advocating for clean air and corporate and government accountability. Her legacy project, the Reconnecting National City & Southeast San Diego Green Corridor, redresses the harm of divisive infrastructure—growing healthier communities that defy the odds and extend the length and quality of life.

THE SAINT

The Saint is a tea educator, storyteller, poet, and founder of Paantine. Drawing on Burmese and Chinese traditions, mindfulness, and tea meditation, she creates accessible spaces for reflection, healing, and connection. Through community workshops, cultural storytelling, and mindful tea rituals, Saint helps people reconnect with themselves, their heritage, and one another.



DIEGO SANDOVAL

Diego Sandoval believes systematic change begins by equipping youth with the tools and knowledge to carry it out. By teaching elementary schoolers how to sort their food waste, or empowering his high school peers to be voices for climate justice, he is building the sustainable future he wants to see, one youth at a time. As a visible advocate for affordable housing, the climate, and human rights in his community, Diego's goal is to show young people how to wield their passion for positive change.

PASTOR JESUS SANDOVAL

Pastor Jesus Sandoval is a faith leader, community advocate, and bridge-builder dedicated to restoring lives and strengthening neighborhoods throughout San Diego. As the Senior Pastor of Remnant Church San Diego, he leads a growing congregation committed to mentorship, outreach, and serving the community with compassion and purpose. In addition to his pastoral leadership, Pastor Sandoval has devoted his career to violence prevention, gang intervention, reentry support, and community restoration. He currently serves in leadership with the City of San Diego's Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention as the Executive Director, founded Community Wraparound, Peacemaker Project and has helped develop collaborative initiatives that bring together government agencies, nonprofits, law enforcement, schools, churches, and community organizations to create safer, healthier communities.



2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES

LELAND SIMPLICIANO

Leland Simpliciano is a first-generation college graduate and descendant of Filipino Sakadas (farmworkers). Grateful for the opportunities open-access education provided, he has spent 15+ years in higher education while continuing his doctoral studies, advancing culturally responsive practices that foster belonging and student success. Beyond campus, he enjoys connecting through local San Diego activities, rooted in the simple moments that bring people together.



CHRYSTIAN SMITH

Chrystian Smith (she/they) is a student affairs professional, educator, and community advocate committed to building more compassionate and equitable systems of support. They currently serve as the Creating Culture of Care Manager at UC San Diego, where they develop wellbeing initiatives, peer education programs, and care-centered practices. Their work spans higher education, community engagement, and advocacy, with a focus on belonging, access, and expansive visions of care.

OLIVIA STEADMAN-OLADIPO

Olivia Tokunbo is the founder of Olivia Tokunbo Wellness, creator of shore and sage wellness market, and an author. Her work lives at the intersection of healing, community, and accessibility. She creates spaces where people can slow down, reconnect, and feel seen and supported. Rooted in care, equity, and belonging, Olivia is deeply committed to making wellness feel welcoming and safe. At the heart of her work is a simple belief: gathering is medicine, and community is the pathway to collective healing and liberation.



NISA THOMAS

Nisa Thomas is a student researcher, STEM advocate, and community leader dedicated to expanding access to technology education. She is the founder of Project Decode, which provides free monthly coding and AI classes through the San Diego County Library, co-founder of her school's Society of Women Engineers chapter, and founder of Brave, Not Perfect (inspired by Reshma Saujani's book), a student organization that encourages resilience, growth, and the confidence to embrace challenges.

2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES



MERCEDES TIGGS, LCSW

Mercedes Tiggs is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), educator, consultant, professor, and social entrepreneur dedicated to advancing mental health, holistic healing, and community empowerment. A proud Former Foster Youth, Mercedes has transformed her lived experience into a powerful platform for advocacy, healing, and innovation in therapeutic practices, most notably through her groundbreaking work in culinary therapy. Mercedes is the founder and owner of Eight16 Culinary Therapy, a transformative wellness practice that blends mindful cooking, trauma-informed therapy, and holistic healing. Through Eight16, she supports individuals and communities in their journey toward self-discovery, nourishment, and emotional resilience.

KASANDRA VALLADOLID

Kasandra Valladolid is the founder of Proyecto Tlali, a binational nonprofit initiative committed to strengthening communities in the San Diego-Tijuana region through education, leadership development, cultural engagement, and cross-border collaboration. Her work is rooted in a longstanding commitment to social impact, with a particular focus on supporting children and youth in foster care facilities and advancing opportunities for underserved populations. Through Proyecto Tlali, Kasandra develops programs and partnerships that promote educational access, civic participation, cultural understanding, and community empowerment on both sides of the border.



GLORIA VERDIEU

Gloria Verdieu is a passionate community activist, writer, author, and poet who has dedicated her life to using her voice for change. She is a proud lifetime member of the Friends of the Malcolm X Library, where she has spent years supporting literacy, cultural education, and community empowerment. Gloria is also a board member of African American Writers & Artists San Diego, where she continues to hone her craft and encourage other Black creatives to share their stories. In addition to her creative work, Gloria is deeply committed to social justice. She serves as an organizer with the San Diego Coalition to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal and All Political Prisoners, tirelessly advocating for human rights and fighting against injustice.

DANIEL ZHANG

Daniel Zhang is a 17-year-old cancer researcher and community builder from San Diego. He co-founded STEAMLabs International, a 501(c)(3) reaching 3,000+ K-8 students across 18 chapters in 4 countries, and Tumor Tactics, a cancer education card game presented at the 2026 UN Science Summit. Selected 1 of 4 students globally for the Indigo Research Lab and 1 of 12 high school scholars at UC Davis Cancer Center, he serves on the SDCOE student board and leads HANG, a 25-musician senior care network.



2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES

ACCESS, INC.

Access, Inc. mission is to address the needs of the most vulnerable and underserved populations in San Diego County by promoting self-sufficiency and economic independence through education and employment opportunities.



CASA CORNELIA
LAW CENTER

CASA CORNELIA LAW CENTER

Casa Cornelia Law Center is a San Diego-based nonprofit public interest law firm providing quality pro bono legal services to victims of human and civil rights violations. Rooted in justice, compassion, and respect for the dignity of every person, we provide compassionate legal representation, uphold human rights, and ensure quality legal support for asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, and survivors of serious crimes, restoring hope through due process.

COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTER

Founded in 1979, **Community Resource Center** (CRC[®]) has a mission to help neighbors create paths to healthy food, stable homes and safe relationships. CRC's vision is communities where everyone has access to the resources they need to live with dignity. CRC serves coastal North County San Diego through food assistance, housing and homelessness services, counseling, case management, domestic violence shelter and advocacy. In 2025, CRC impacted more than 9,500 people.



Karen Organization
of San Diego

KAREN ORGANIZATION OF SAN DIEGO

Founded in 2009 by refugees from Burma (Myanmar), the **Karen Organization of San Diego** (KOSD) is the only community-based organization in San Diego dedicated to serving refugees from Burma. KOSD advances educational, civic, and economic opportunities for ethnic groups from Burma while honoring cultural heritage. Since 2007, more than 2,000 refugees from Burma have resettled in the San Diego region after fleeing ethnic and religious persecution, often spending decades in refugee camps with limited access to education, employment, and essential services. KOSD was established to help bridge these gaps by providing culturally and linguistically responsive services that empower refugees to achieve long-term self-sufficiency.

2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES



KIND HEARTS SAN DIEGO

Kind Hearts San Diego is a grassroots, women-led, community-based organization that came to existence as a welcoming group of volunteers for newcomers resettled in San Diego County in 2016. During the last 5 years, our services and operations have expanded significantly offering even more culturally and linguistically appropriate services and programs to the refugees and newcomers we support. Our case management and resource navigation sessions offer an integral opportunity to connect our clients with the appropriate programs they can get support from; whether through our organization, government institutions or partner organizations and businesses.

LKW STEM FOUNDATION

LKW STEM FOUNDATION, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization built on a simple but powerful belief: *BRILLIANCE EXISTS IN EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD, EVERY SCHOOL, AND EVERY CHILD!* United by a shared vision and a deep commitment to expanding opportunity, Dr. Lavar and Mrs. Kristina Watkins have dedicated their lives to empowering students, strengthening communities, and building pathways through STEM Education. *LET'S CHANGE THE WORLD... ONE STEMSTASTICAL EXPERIENCE AT A TIME BECAUSE A FUTURE IN STEM MAKES LIFE GREAT!*



PROJECT NEW VILLAGE

Project New Village is a food justice nonprofit organization embracing urban farming and community engagement as primary tools to improve food access, food security, and environmental wellness throughout greater Southeastern San Diego. Improving fresh food access in Southeastern San Diego is part of a broad based movement to build healthy neighborhoods, protect the environment, and create a resilient equity-based food system that works for everyone. Project New Village is transforming the political and economic environment using neighborhood-based agricultural cooperatives as strategies of resistance to food insecurity and removing barriers that impede universal access to good food through community/civic engagement and building alternative food ecosystems.

SAN DIEGO FUTURES FOUNDATION

Our mission is to bridge the digital divide in San Diego County by connecting and empowering under-served communities through affordable computers, device repair, digital skills and workforce development opportunities.

Purpose: **SDFF** believes that nothing—and no one—is disposable. Through the responsible reuse of technology, we empower people and communities to build a stronger, more equitable future.



2026 ILIA AWARDS NOMINEES

SOLPATH COUNSELING & HOLISTIC WELLNESS

SolPath Counseling & Holistic Wellness provides BIPOC, Queer-affirming, and trauma-informed psychotherapy and holistic care in San Diego. Rooted in liberation, identity, and real community, we utilize a decolonized framework in our practice. SolPath offers support groups for queer, transgender, and non-binary individuals, educational workshops, and community events.



THINK DIGNITY

Hands-on Advocacy & Activism with
People Experiencing Homelessness

THINK DIGNITY

Think Dignity is a San Diego nonprofit advancing basic dignity for people experiencing homelessness. Founded in 2006, we fill critical gaps through direct-service programs — the ID Bank, Transitional Storage Center, and Street Boutique — alongside Dignity Legal Services, which removes legal barriers through expungement and record relief, and the Basic Dignity Coalition, which centers lived experience in advocacy. We believe lasting change comes from practical solutions, strong partnerships, and treating every person with the dignity they deserve.



NOTABLE GUESTS & ENTERTAINMENT

EMCEE

Ramel Wallace is a multi-disciplinary artist and the Senior Community Manager at BAM, where he oversees events for venture-backed companies. With over fifteen years as a recording artist, he hosts CreativeMornings/San Diego and serves on the board of the San Diego African American Museum of Fine Art. As CEO of The Holyfield, Wallace continues to blend art, tech, and community leadership.



NOTABLE GUESTS & ENTERTAINMENT



EMCEE

Shayla James is an artist, educator, and community advocate whose work connects arts, creative youth development, and cultural policy. She is Director of the San Diego Creative Youth Development Network, co-creator of heARTSpace, and a teaching artist dedicated to expanding access to inclusive arts learning. Through collaboration and community-centered leadership, Shayla champions creative spaces where young people and communities can thrive.

RECEPTION ENTERTAINMENT

DJ DAUCHÉ is a San Diego born and based internationally acclaimed Touring DJ, Creative Producer, and Curator of Experiences. A luminary in her field, her mastery extends beyond music, as she crafts immersive sonic landscapes that transcend the boundaries of genre. Fueled by her passion for R&B, Soul, and Hip-Hop her euphoric-inducing sounds create a memorable experience that will move any crowd. More than a DJ, she possesses an innate gift for igniting the deepest soulful vibes, instilling a profound sense of joy, pride, and empowerment in all who have the privilege of experiencing her artistry.



RECEPTION PERFORMANCE

Bird Songs, or "**Ashaa Takook**" are referred to in thier traditonal tongue, are the original songs of this area's first people, The Kumeyaay Nation. The song are in the Kumeyaay language and tell allegorical stories and histories through a cycle of songs that takes more than twenty four hours to sing to conclusion. The songs also speak the relationship of The Kumeyaay to one another, and to the land. The traditonal territory of the Kumeyaay stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Colorado River, and approximately seventy five miles north and south of the modern US Mexican Border. The Ashaa Takook Bird Singers travel throughout the region performing traditional song and dance for various ceremonial and social functions.

OPENING PERFORMANCE

Danza Azteca is a group formed by a family and neighbors of Linda Vista, we want to embrace our culture and leave this culture to our new generation. We focused in getting our children involved because they're the seeds for our future.



NOTABLE GUESTS & ENTERTAINMENT

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' DAY WELCOME

Lauren J. Mapp (she/her/akaónha) is a Daylight San Diego co-founder and journalist who graduated as a RISE San Diego Gen X fellow in 2025. She has covered Indigenous communities, social justice, health care art, music, travel, local restaurants and culinary traditions since 2005. Mapp has written for The San Diego Union-Tribune, inewsource, Times of San Diego, Edible San Diego, San Diego Magazine and the North Coast Current. She is Black and Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), and started her career as a reporter for Indian Time and The People's Voice, two newspapers on the Akwesasne reservation that straddles the border of Upstate New York and Ontario.



WELCOME POEM

Leah Goodwin believes that the arts are a universal tool for healing. An accomplished and published poet and writer, she is the CEO of Leah Goodwin Creations and has an extensive background in the arts that includes award-winning arts in education and arts in hospitals programming and public art collections creation and management. She created the San Diego Experience of the Civil Rights Movement exhibit in 2015 and created and curated the 1619 Celebration of Black Women exhibit for the California Women's Museum in 2019. Her honors include a Moxie Award for Woman of Grit and Determination and being featured in Beautiful, Brilliant and Brave: of Black Women exhibit for her work in art and culture.

BOARD CHAIR WELCOME

Salina Villegas has over 15 years of experience serving non-profit, corporate, and educational sectors in their efforts to provide leadership development, educational equity, and culture change initiatives. Currently, she works with the Division of Race & Equity in the Office of the Independent Budget Analyst at the City of San Diego where she develops content and facilitates trainings, workshops, and programs focused on advancing racial equity outcomes for City departments, mayoral appointees, and city council offices.



CLOSING PERFORMANCE

For San Diego-born R&B singer, multi-instrumentalist, and producer **Geminelle**, music and healing are inseparable. Her work sits at the intersection of sound, reflection, and intentional living, using rhythm, repetition, and language to transform internal dialogue and reconnect people with purpose. In 2019, she released her wellness-focused Mantra Loops series, turning a personal practice into a shared ritual that has supported the well-being and emotional regulation of thousands. Today, the Mantra Loops universe continues to grow through music, merchandise, children's books, experiential events, and Mantra Loops Vol. 3, currently in development.

THANK YOU TO OUR VENDORS!



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