



Dear Friends,

Welcome to the Mark Awards!

We are honored to have you join us as we celebrate the accomplishments of members of Fairfield County's vibrant arts and culture community: artist Aisha Nailah, the Ballet School of Stamford and Westport Library's VersoFest.

We are proud to present the Lifetime Achievement ACE Award to Laurence Caso, Executive Director of the Klein Memorial Auditorium, whose leadership has significantly expanded access to arts and education in Bridgeport.

This year marks an exciting new chapter as we rebrand the ACE Awards with an impactful new look, and embrace new leadership under Executive Director Douglas Laustsen. I am grateful to CAFC's Board for their guidance and continued support, to Jim Naughton, our distinguished spokesman for this evening's celebration, and to Administrative Assistant Marisa Govin for her dedication. Special thanks to this year's Co-Chairs Jen Wastrom and Pam Robey, for making this re-MARK-able evening possible.

In these challenging times, support for the arts and culture community remains crucial. We are deeply grateful to our members, sponsors, donors and volunteers, and look forward to continuing this important work together. Please join us in making our mark by making a donation today.

Warm Regards,

Cheryl Williams, CAFC Board President

SCAN QR CODE TO DONATE





Dear Friends,

My name is Douglas Laustsen, and since January I have had the privilege of serving as Executive Director of the Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County.

I am deeply grateful to the Board of Directors for entrusting me with the stewardship of this vital organization, whose mission is to promote, support, and advocate for the arts and culture sector across Lower Fairfield County.

It has been an absolute joy to get to know the Cultural Alliance's membership—an inspiring network of artists, educators, nonprofit leaders, and creative entrepreneurs whose work strengthens our communities every day. Their passion and commitment are the foundation of a vibrant cultural ecosystem.

There are hundreds of individuals who are regularly leaving their **mark** on Fairfield County. Tonight, we are proud to honor four remarkable award recipients: Aisha Nailah, VersoFest, The Ballet School of Stamford, and Laurence Caso. Each embodies the energy of an **Exclamation Mark** through their excellence, innovation, and dedication to the arts. We're lucky that they have chosen to do their work in our communities. Their effort makes Fairfield County one of the most arts vibrant regions in the nation.

Thank you for joining us this evening and for your continued support. Your presence and generosity make this celebration possible and ensure that we can continue advancing arts and culture for everyone in Fairfield County.

With gratitude,
Douglas Laustsen



The Dynamic Honorees



Aisha Nailah is a multidisciplinary artist working primarily in abstract and abstract figurative forms.

Her work is deeply informed by her lived experiences—growing up in a Costa Rican household, her identity as a Black woman raised in an inner city, and her connection to African diasporic culture and ancestral reverence. Largely self-taught, Aisha holds a Bachelor's degree in Art Therapy and is a certified educator and teaching artist.

Aisha's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including at the National Black Theatre in Harlem, Aqua Art Miami, and the Fairfield University Art Museum. Public art and mural projects are central to her practice, including the Freeman Sisters Mural (Bridgeport, CT, 2021), Majestic Theater mural (2021), and multiple commissions with Colorful Bridgeport Public Art, where she has also served as a teaching artist.



The Dynamic Honorees



“We believe dance has the power to inspire, transform, and build confidence.

In 27 years, the Ballet School of Stamford has provided \$1.5 million in scholarships to local children and 25,500 students have attended our free performances.

For the audience, this may be their first experience with live dance in a theater and it can open them up to want to pursue artistic endeavors or simply build a deeper understanding of the arts, both are incredible outcomes. For our students performing, they get a professional experience which helps them understand discipline, commitment and of course the joy of performing on stage!”

The Ballet School of Stamford



The Dynamic Honorees



“We’re honored by the Mark award recognition, but what matters most is what it represents.

VersoFest is part of a larger effort to expand the role of the public library, creating space for music, media, and cultural dialogue alongside traditional learning. It’s intentional work, it’s community-driven, and it’s gratifying to see it recognized.”

Bill Harmer, Executive Director, Westport Library

Verso Studios is the Westport Library’s media arm, replete with an SSL hybrid analog sound studio and broadcast control suite featuring a state-of-the-art console and six robotic cameras, and the Trefz Forum, an open, flexible space that can accommodate up to 650 patrons and features an 18-foot video wall, 35-foot stage, state-of-the-art sound, theatrical lighting, and video and digital projection.



Ace Lifetime Achievement Award



"Sometimes in life we meet someone who even years later we realize changed us in some way. That's what I hope the characters and stories I help present on television and on stage do for the audience. And I am grateful to those artists with whom I've collaborated for changing my life as well." *Laurence Caso*

Laurence Caso became The Klein's Executive Director in 2014 after serving on its board for 6 years. Prior to, he worked at CBS in comedy and drama series development as Director of Specials and Vice President of Daytime Programs; he was also VP of Programs for the start-up of the Disney Channel.

The Klein Memorial Auditorium is a 1437-seat performing arts center serving the greater Bridgeport region since 1940. The Klein's mission is to "enrich, educate, and entertain through arts and ideas".



Exclamation Mark! Sponsor

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to all of the sponsors who have helped us HIT THE MARK for this, the CAFC's only annual fundraiser. Together we are making meaningful crossroads within the creative landscape of Fairfield County.





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Acknowledgements

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and Cindy Vaccaro

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James Naughton

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