

# Trailblazer Award



**Jane Golden**  
 Founder and Executive Director of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program

*“Community-based public art has an uncanny ability to shine a light on our diversity while also shining a light on our commonality,”*

says Jane Golden, executive director of Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program. Golden, a trained artist and political science scholar, came to Philadelphia by way of Los Angeles in 1984 and has been the city's agent of change through art services ever since. Iconic works like Keith Haring's "We the Youth" and Steve ESPO Powers' "Love Letter" series have been painted under her watch, making Philadelphia a capital of public art. But it's her talent for using art to empower and inspire communities that has transformed the city.

Golden's career started with a small anti-graffiti program, in which murals were used as a means to visually

reclaim low-income neighborhoods. "In those early days, we were working in neighborhoods where the only other employees were the police," she says. "The murals became a mirror that we were holding up to people and saying, 'Your life counts.'" This formative, first-hand experience building change from the ground up, collaborating with city government, and bridging divides between communities sparked a fire in Golden: She set out to create an art program that could serve every neighborhood, school, and public department in Philadelphia. In 1997, Deputy Mayor (then commissioner) Michael DiBerardinis gave her the go-ahead, and the Mural Arts Program was born. "Jane has a unique and powerful view of the role and purpose of public art in the life of the city," DiBerardinis says. "Most see art as a singular expression, viewed in the comfort of a museum. Jane sees art as a

collaborative and community-building process where citizens can become part of imagining art that speaks to their collective experience and communal aspirations. Her one-of-a-kind talent and deep commitment to public art have made Philadelphia the world's 'city of murals.'"

Since then, Golden has worked at lightning speed, harnessing the power of community-based public art to address a range of urban challenges, such as poverty, public safety, health, education, and environmental sustainability. One of her first projects was in Grays Ferry in 1998, at a time when racial tension in the area was at its peak. After speaking with several residents, Golden had an idea to paint a mural of hundreds of different hands. "The prediction was that there would be violence and the wall would be defaced," she recalls. "Instead, people were out there



Left: Jane Golden painting *The Ledge Wall* mural, 1994. Photo by Jack Ramsdale. Courtesy of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.



Right: North Philadelphia Beacon Project Mural Dedication, October 25, 2013. Pictured: Jane Golden. Photo by Steve Weinik. Courtesy of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.

working together every night, and bringing each other cookies and tea. It was the most integrated event that neighborhood had ever seen, and it changed the conversation from race to things like economic development, schools, and housing." Most recently, Golden has overseen *Southeast by Southeast*, a mural-making project for Asian communities in South Philly that addresses issues of trauma and resilience.

Working with citizens in need is a cornerstone of the Mural Arts Program. "Through weaving a lot of people together, we're really able to move the needle and see change," Golden says. "Every project is very different but it's always extremely inspiring." In fact, Golden seeks out the untouchable areas of the city to help overcome stigmas of mental illness, addiction, and homelessness. In 2010, as part of a partnership with the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disabilities Services, she turned the basement of a methadone clinic into an artists' studio. "That represented a real sea of change for the clinic," she says. "Patients were sticking with their recovery for longer and as such, the community began to look at them in a different way." Golden also instituted The Guild, a program that helps prison inmates and young adults on probation re-integrate into their communities through landscaping, mosaic tiling, and mural repair.

A recent study conducted by the Yale School of Medicine shows that the Mural Arts' process leads to

"collective efficacy," an increased ability for a community to address its own needs. It's a finding that offers hard evidence to the opening words of Mural Arts' mission:

*"We believe that art ignites change."*

Though Golden's accomplishments are impossible to quantify, don't expect to find her resting on her laurels. She has big plans for the future of the Mural Arts Program: "I feel very proud of the fact that we have 1,500 kids in our after school and summer in the school day programs," she says. "But I want to see that quadruple over the next few years." She also wants to expand *Artrepreneurs*, a program that teaches high schoolers marketable skills like web design and urban planning to help them develop their own artistic

enterprises. "I would like to train kids across the city in fields related to the creative economy," she says. "I want them to think about the choices out there for creative thinkers. Philadelphia's children should have every opportunity and option available to them so that their dreams can come to fruition."

The overall effect of the Mural Arts Program proves that the process of creating art is as important as the art itself. "There are so many great thinkers in Philadelphia, and we want to continually create partnerships and be collaborative. That's how we really advance our agenda," she says. "I love galleries and museums but I don't think art belongs exclusively behind those walls. Murals make art available to all of us."



Jane Golden and the PAGN crew painting the *Mt. Kilimanjaro* mural at 20th & Diamond Streets, 1988. Photo courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as part of the Philadelphia Inquirer Collection.





PHILADELPHIA MAGAZINE'S

# Trailblazer Award

**Philadelphia magazine founded the Trailblazer Award 11 years ago to honor and celebrate women in the Philadelphia region who are pioneers within their fields, well accomplished successful leaders and have made considerable contributions to their respective peers and community.**

## 2015 Trailblazer Selection Committee

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