

## Our 2024-2025 Cullen Fellows

BUILDING THE BENCH OF WNY'S PERFORMING ARTS SECTOR LEADERS

### What is the Cullen Fellows Program?

The Cullen Fellows program reflects the foundation's belief that development of talent is essential to strengthening individual professionals, organizations, and elevating WNY's performing arts sector as a whole.

The year-long, self-designed program provides substantive new learning opportunities for promising performing arts leaders to move from "success to significance" by providing them with the financial resources to enhance their skills through intentionally selected activities and a customized professional advancement plan.

[LEARN MORE](#)

## Welcoming our 2024-2025 Cullen Fellows

SHAW FESTIVAL  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### TIM JENNINGS

\*COHORT FACILITATOR\*

WHY ARE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, MENTORING AND COACHING CRITICAL RESOURCES FOR EMERGING ARTS LEADERS AT PIVOTAL POINTS IN THEIR CAREERS?

"I think the main thing you realize at a certain point in your career, if you do any kind of self-reflection, is how much you don't know. The ability to dig into the wealth of information available through your peers, colleagues and mentors is a great gift. It is often one people feel uncomfortable asking someone for. Maybe because successful people seem so busy, or people are nervous to approach those they don't know for advice. But a mentor gains from these relationships as well, by asking them to dig into their accumulated experience and distill the information they have come to through lived experience. It is so useful to be given access to that chance to reflect and regurgitate what you know. It reminds you that you have answers and, when you don't, to look for them in similar ways. Emerging leaders challenge the status quo. They ask good, hard questions with an eye to the current realities. In the arts, that refreshment of ideas is a constant need, and those conversations help guide the future of our organizations into the future. We do not exist in vacuums. If we are not in constant dialogue with our field, we will be left behind. This kind of program incentivizes us to be in the conversation. It makes it easier."

SHAW FESTIVAL  
ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

### KIMBERLEY RAMPERSAD

\*COHORT FACILITATOR\*

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT LEARNINGS AND PRACTICES THAT AN EMERGING ARTS LEADER WILL ACQUIRE FROM A PROGRAM LIKE CULLEN FELLOWS?

"Though they are a cohort, the beauty of this program is its ability to craft a bespoke learning experience for each of these emerging arts leaders. I hope they further develop their language skills, as language shapes our universe. And as leaders they are creating the space in which the work happens. I hope they're able to further refine their processes, understanding that meeting rooms are no different than the rehearsal halls – spaces in which devotion to technique and process to allow for creativity to flourish. And because leadership can be lonely, I hope the Fellows walk away with an improved ability to self-motivate, self-assess, and self-correct."

SHAKESPEARE IN DELAWARE PARK

### GRETCHEN DIDIO

\*OFFICE & EDUCATION MANAGER\*

YOU TRANSITIONED FROM ACTING AT SHAKESPEARE IN DELAWARE PARK (SIDP) TO BECOMING A STAFF MEMBER. WHY IS SIDP IMPORTANT TO YOU AND HOW WILL THE FELLOWS PROGRAM ACCELERATE THE IMPACT YOU HAVE ON THE ORGANIZATION AND MAKE BOTH YOU AND SIDP STRONGER?

"Shakespeare in Delaware Park was the first professional acting job I received after graduating college. Not only did it kick start my acting career but it's also the place where I met my now husband! SDP has held a special place in my heart for almost 10 years now and I feel so fortunate to be able to contribute to its success on stage and off. I believe the Fellows Program will equip me with the skills to be a more effective leader and a notable arts administrator in WNY. As SDP approaches its 50th season, I want to ensure my place in its legacy and help continue the tradition of bringing free Shakespeare to the community."

BUFFALO STRING WORKS

### WHITNEY DANN

\*DEVELOPMENT MANAGER\*

ACCESS TO THE PERFORMING ARTS IS VERY PERSONAL TO YOU. TELL US HOW YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES AND PAST ACCESS CHALLENGES BROUGHT YOU TO BUFFALO STRING WORKS AND HOW YOU INTEND TO MERGE YOUR LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH YOUR CAREER?

"Growing up, access to music education was essential for my personal growth. The lack of access in Buffalo for these students was the reason I was drawn to Buffalo String Works. In working with Buffalo String Works I can work with others toward a shared goal of expanding music education access and hope to share the guiding influence of music with students, as it has profoundly shaped my life."

KENAN CENTER

### HEATHER BENSON

\*ARTS & ENGAGEMENT MANAGER\*

TELL US ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK AT AN ORGANIZATION, KENAN CENTER, THAT'S BEEN PART OF YOUR AND YOUR FAMILY'S LIFE FOR SO LONG, AND HOW YOU CAN BRING A LIVED YET FRESH PERSPECTIVE TO KENAN TO EXPAND ITS PERFORMING ARTS OFFERINGS.

"Working at the Kenan Center has been a perfect fit for me. Kenan was the first place that I played soccer growing up and where I met a group of friends and family that I remained in contact with throughout my high school soccer career. Because of this experience I was able to understand the concept of community and how important it is to everyone. As a result, my kids also now play and learn on the Kenan Campus. Performing Arts is another way that we at Kenan connect with people and I'm excited to use my passion for the community focused mission at the Kenan Center to continue to change and evolve with the times, to ensure that all of our programs are accessible and so that other kids and families have the same opportunities that I did."

ALLEYWAY THEATRE

### EMMA SCHIMMINGER

\*PRODUCTION MANAGER/TECHNICAL DIRECTOR\*

YOU ARE ONE OF FEW TECHNICAL AND PRODUCTION STAFF MEMBERS IN WNY (AND OUR FIRST TECHNICAL AND PRODUCTION CULLEN FELLOW). HOW WILL YOUR UNIQUE BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVE IMPACT THE CULLEN FELLOWS COHORT AND POSITIVELY INFLUENCE ALLEYWAY THEATRE AND WNY'S LARGER PERFORMING ARTS SECTOR?

"I believe to truly be a well rounded and influential member of the arts community, one needs to have experiences that run the gamut of all facets of what we do, and I'm looking forward to sharing my existing production experience and knowledge with the rest of the cohort (as well as learning from them). The Cullen Fellows program gives me the opportunity to travel nationally in order to expand my technical and design knowledge, as well as connect with arts organizations and practitioners from outside of WNY. Then, I can share my expanded experiences with not only the cohort and Alleyway, but with the WNY arts community at large."

BURCHFIELD PENNEY ART CENTER

### SONNY BAKER

\*PUBLIC PROGRAMS MANAGER\*

YOU'RE A LIFELONG BUFFALONIAN AND LOCAL MUSICIAN; YOUR PARTICIPATION IN CULLEN FELLOWS AFFORDS YOU AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE VARIOUS PERFORMING ARTS SCENES OUTSIDE WNY. WHAT EXCITES YOU ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY AND WHAT TYPES OF NEW IDEAS DO YOU HOPE TO BRING BACK TO YOUR HOMETOWN AND BPAC?

"I'm so incredibly grateful to be what is this program. I can't wait to see what is new, groundbreaking and thriving in other communities. I'd like to develop and craft new ideas and experiences to adapt to the Burchfield Penney. More variety, more diversity, unique performances to our space and the city of Buffalo."

