



Speech by Rip Rapson:

**Kresge Arts
Fellows reflect
Detroit's
cultural and
artistic wealth**

July 12, 2017

*Remarks delivered by Kresge Foundation President
and CEO Rip Rapson at the 2017 Kresge Arts in
Detroit Fellows reception.*

An avalanche of thanks:

Michelle (Perron, founding director of Kresge Arts in Detroit) – it is always such a pleasure to follow in the wake of such grace and elegance.

Christina (DeRoos, director of Kresge Arts in Detroit) – we appreciate so deeply the incredible skill you bring to choreographing the entire process, including this evening's events.

To the College for Creative Studies – Rick Roger's continuing leadership in all things related to creativity and design reinforce daily why this program has grown and thrived under the CCS roof.

Mahogany – what a fabulous reminder of the kind of talent that we are here to acknowledge, celebrate, and honor.

And to all of you – you represent the extraordinary path we have traveled in the ten years since we launched our Kresge Arts in Detroit fellowships.

Kresge is a national foundation, established in 1924 with a

mission to promote human progress. That was the vision of Sebastian Kresge whose fortune from the S.S. Kresge five-and-dime stores makes our work possible to this day. In the 2000s, we have interpreted our work as centered on America's cities, with City No. 1 being our original home – Detroit.

From the moment I stepped foot in this remarkable city, it was crystal clear that arts and culture provided an indispensable bedrock for the city's reimagination.

- In our large cultural institutions lay the patrimony of a rich and vibrant history, a patrimony that had to be made relevant to the next generation's aspirations.
- In our scrappier, more community-based organizations were the seeds of reinvention, pioneering new forms of expression, connecting our past to our present and our present to our future.
- In our artists resided the restless energies of probing and questioning and challenging, energies essential to constructive disruption, and to progress.

So, it was equally clear to me that we at Kresge needed to make a heightened commitment to the artistic and cultural life of the city. At the inaugural meeting of the Cultural Alliance in 2007, held at the Arab-American National Museum, I accordingly announced that we would launch a four-part effort:

- One, general operating support for cultural organizations of all kinds of sizes.
- Two, an eminent artist award to valorize the lifetime contributions of an artist to his or her art-form and to Detroit.
- Three, support for arts and culture infrastructure such as the Alliance.
- And four, annual fellowships of \$25,000 apiece for eighteen to twenty artists in the visual, performing, and literary arts.

It's impossible to convey how pleased I am with the path we've traveled since. Here we are 2017 with the ninth class of Kresge Artist Fellows, and the fourth class of Gilda Awardees, honoring early career risk-takers with \$5,000 in likewise unrestricted support. The class of 2017 brings our total to 174 fellows and awardees – and to more

than \$4.5 million to individual artists when we include our nine eminent artists.

Recession, bankruptcy, corruption – Detroit has weathered a great deal in the intervening years. But this community has fought hard – is still fighting hard – to regain its footing; to kindle new opportunities; to build a social, political, and economic future in which all its residents can participate fully.

It is no surprise that the arts community is helping propel these efforts.

The diversity of talents, accomplishments and aspirations of this cohort of Artist Fellows and Gilda Awardees – like the cohorts of every preceding year – is a breathtaking reflection of the community’s collective cultural and artistic wealth.

We’d like to think that the fellowships have value above and beyond their monetary value, as important as that is. We have some evidence that that is true in the form of a third-party evaluation of the fellowship program that we just received. Four quick observations.

- First, the evaluation confirms that fellowships accelerate careers along their trajectories, opening new possibilities for art-making practices. It takes will and determination to be an artist in the first place – the embodiment of the Detroit “hustle-harder” ethos. You all know that. But fellows told our evaluation team that a fellowship, nonetheless, is a boost to confidence, and a boost to the esteem in which you are held.
- Second, the evaluation suggests that a dollar to an artist tends to circulate differently from a dollar to, say, a rocket scientist or an accountant. Artists are more likely to spend money with, and hire, fellow artists, recirculating some of their award among peers and colleagues.
- Third, the fellowships build social capital – strengthening the informal bonds of support across the arts and cultural community.
- And fourth, the fellowships have helped raise the visibility among civic leaders of the integral roles that artists play in civic revitalization. My conversation with the Detroit Mayor in 2008 about the centrality of the arts is a very different conversation from my conversation with Mayor

Duggan today. We have a planning director for whom arts and culture and design and architectural preservation are core propellants of community progress. We have seen an increasingly robust civic dialogue about the need to infuse creativity into every aspect of civic problem-solving.

When I gave that talk in 2007 at the Arab-American National Museum, I remarked that I was relatively new to the city. I shared my surprise at the discovery of a magnificent, muscular, and proud city with vibrant cultural traditions – not the dystopian narrative that had been championed at the time by so many media outlets and urban planning skeptics. In my 11th year here, I think of myself as a Detroiter among friends. The surprise is long-gone, but the appreciation only grows for what we are – and what we are striving to be.

And speaking of friends, I'd like to welcome to the stage Rick Rogers, the president of the College for Creative Studies. For those of you who know Rick, you recognize in his tenure at CCS the evolution of one of this city's most compelling, assiduously cultivated and stewarded creative visions. For those of you who don't, let me introduce you to one of our community's great – and too often underappreciated – treasures.