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Group Foundation Awards Celebrate Those Making a Difference in the World Using Groups

The Dr. Robert H. Klein Social Responsibility Award and the Group Foundation Humanitarian Award

Maryetta Andrews-Sachs, MA, LICSW, CGP, AGPA-F, Group Assets Editor

The Group Foundation for Advancing Mental Health is privileged to be able to use its awards programs to recognize individuals and organizations who use groups to effect change in communities. They demonstrate how our work benefits people well beyond our organizations. We will be presenting the Robert H. Klein Social Responsibility Award and the Humanitarian Award at the upcoming AGPA Connect in New York City as part of the Tri-Organizational Awards Ceremony, Wednesday, March 4, at the Sheraton New York Times Square. We highlight the inspiring recipients below and hope you can be with us in New York to honor them.

Robert H. Klein Social Responsibility Award

The Foundation is proud to announce that this year's recipient of the Robert H. Klein Social Responsibility Award is **Latoyia Griffin, LCSW, CGP, AGPA-F**. This important award was inaugurated in 2010 and was endowed and named in 2024 to honor Robert H. Klein, a Past President and long-time AGPA member who passed away in 2023.



Latoyia Griffin

Bob received this award in 2020 in recognition of his lifelong commitment to helping communities heal after traumatic events and for his generous nature in providing pro bono work. This is given annually to an AGPA member, a group of members, an Affiliate Society, or an affiliated organization of mental health professionals who has provided an exceptional service that ultimately benefits the community-at-large. We decided to present comments from the many letters received nominating Ms. Latoyia Griffin for this award as they speak to the exceptional work for which Ms. Griffin is honored.

Leo Leiderman, PsyD, ABPP, CGP, AGPA-F, AGPA President-Elect: "I consider her leadership, wisdom, guidance, dedication, vision, generosity, and commitment towards social justice, social responsibility, human rights, and DEIA initiatives to be highly inspiring and unmatched. Her voice, perspectives, insights, guidance, and expertise have contributed enormously to many national and local professional organizations seeking to address the impact of systemic racism, lack of safety, and inclusivity for their organizations and members who identify as BIPOC and/or from marginalized groups."

Kumea Shorter-Gooden, PhD, AGPA DEIA Consultant: "Wow! It's hard to imagine someone more deserving of this award than Latoyia. She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Certified Group Psychotherapist who has been a powerful advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion - with a focus on transforming and reshaping AGPA as well as the discipline and field of group psychotherapy. Hours and hours of her pro bono time have gone to support AGPA and the Northern California Group Psychotherapy Society (NCGPS) in becoming more competent with respect to DEI and in articulating, implementing and living out their DEI aims and values."

Craig Haen, PhD, LCAT, CGP, AGPA-F, Co-Chair, AGPA Community Outreach Task Force: "Importantly, Latoyia lives the values she advocates, truly 'walking the walk.' She demonstrates time and again that she does not view DEI work as a zero-sum endeavor. For example, when tensions emerged between [organizational groups], Latoyia stood in the middle ground, bridging perspectives, and showing how equity work can expand, rather than diminish, inclusion."

Tony Sheppard, PsyD, CGP, AGPA-F, AGPA DEIA Co-Chair: "Latoyia is an accomplished leader in several organizations that cut across many areas of her life. She

performs all of her work with respect for other people. While she might disagree with someone, she still holds them with regard for their humanity. Latoyia has given so deeply of herself. She is truly changing our organization for the better with her insistence on issues surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility being part of our ever-evolving field. In that sense, she is a true visionary deserving of this most esteemed award."

Congratulations, Latoyia, for this well-deserved award.

Humanitarian Award

The Humanitarian Award is given to an individual or group whose work has reached into a community to provide vitally needed services in a manner that reflects the deeply held values of AGPA and the Group Foundation. This year, the Group Foundation Board has chosen the **Irondale Ensemble Project** located in Brooklyn, New York. Upon hearing this news, **Terry Greiss**, Irondale's Executive Director said, "Of all the awards one can win, this speaks the most to the work we do. This gets to the core of why Irondale exists." Irondale is one of the longest-standing ensemble theatres in America, founded in 1983 by three young actors, Terry, Jim Niesen, and Barbara Mackenzie-Wood. According to Terry:



Terry Greiss

"Irondale exists at the intersection of art, education, community engagement, and social justice. We develop long-term artistic collaborations to create theatre that expands the boundaries of the art form and helps audiences and artists make sense of today's world.

Every play and program we produce is chosen for its relevance to what is going on in the world now. Our projects range from epic theater pieces developed over several years to work that immediately engages at-risk youth, young scientists and engineers, and the New York City Police Department.

At the core of what we do is the notion that theatre can lead us to a greater understanding of who we are and how we can communicate with each other - and coexist with empathy and compassion - in an increasingly polarized world."

Terry described the "To Protect, Serve, and Understand" workshop created after he wrote a concerned letter to the Police Commissioner following the Eric Garner murder in New York. Consequently, for the last ten years, they have brought law enforcement and civilians together, first to break bread, and then to use theater games to deepen connections and understanding of "the other." He commented on how theater by its nature is an intimate art and the techniques allow you to reveal yourself. For example, exercises include "See and be seen," or "What are you afraid of?" Terry noted the human need for authentic connection and the shock of recognition when we find ourselves in "the other". I was thinking of how "Fear is the father of hate" and how the overall arch of this ensemble's work is to address that and

create understanding and community.

Irondale has recently expanded their mission by creating The Theatre of Empathy, seeing that there are so many things dividing us as a people that finding more ways to bring theater to the communities around the world to build trust, empathy, and compassion is key to their work. He noted that the best way to help immigrants learn American mores is through play and the theatre game method. This allows an individual to confront their own experience directly.

"This is an arts program designed to bring people into the same room physically and metaphorically and give them the freedom in a non-judgmental atmosphere to be their authentic selves."

The more I heard Terry describe Irondale's work, the more it sounded like good group therapy!!!

When I first learned about Irondale decades ago, they were going into the New York City public schools to work with kids around AIDS. They continue to have Youth Programs for different ages, as well as a Tech Track for students in the various elements of technical theater. They have a STEM to STEAM program to help science students learn to be better communicators. They have School Residencies to assist with curriculum and other programs. Under a State Department grant, they have been to Belgium to work with Middle Eastern artists, and soon, Terry will be going to India to teach these methods.

As this is a theatre company, the Irondale Ensemble has also continued to present and co-present new work in very creative ways.

"We treat each play - whether an original piece or a classic piece - as if it were written yesterday. We connect past, present, and future and try to understand how they interconnect."

Regarding their work over these decades, Terry said, "Looking back to the beginning, I feel extremely proud. I feel we have done something extraordinary, and someday people may find out about it. I feel it has been done with the best of intentions, the noblest ideas behind it. I don't feel we've ever sold out. We've never compromised the mission of the company. The mission has evolved."

This is truly a program focused on improving community - and they are well deserving of the recognition of the Group Foundation Humanitarian Award.

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GIFTS ACKNOWLEDGED HERE ARE FROM JANUARY 1, 2025, THROUGH DECEMBER 31, 2025

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