

Lewandowski '97 Awarded Visionary Leadership Award

Feb 29, 2016

Co-founder and executive director of The Chocolate Factory in Queens, NY, Sheila Lewandowski '97 was awarded the Dr. Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award. This award recognizes a member of the Bennington community whose innovative and inspirational leadership has advanced civic and cultural life and improved the lives of others.

Since its founding in 2004, The Chocolate Factory Theater—an award-winning incubator for experimental performance in Queens, New York—has supported over 900 artists and as many as 40,000 visitors. In addition, Ms. Lewandowski instituted the annual Taste of Long Island City as an economic and community development project, the proceeds of which further the work of The Chocolate Factory's artists each year.

From 2004 to 2006 Ms. Lewandowski served as the first managing director of Queens Council on the Arts (QCA). During this time, she was instrumental in helping to secure new funding for QCA, increasing the budget by over 20%, expanding services to the 2.2 million residents of Queens, its visitors, and businesses.

"The real flavor of Sheila's leadership comes not simply from what she's achieved but how she's achieved it," said Bennington College President Mariko Silver. "A fierce advocate for the arts, Sheila recognizes that cultural development goes hand in hand with community development. She sees her ambitions for The Chocolate Factory as an integral part of a community fabric that extends to transportation, schools, affordable housing, and the people who go about their daily lives there."

At the award presentation on Saturday, Lewandowski talked about a pivotal moment in the early days of The Chocolate Factory, when the politician asked her why he should fund the arts. "Artists are going to do it anyway. Why should we fund it?"

She was temporarily stumped; as an artist, she knew it was true.

The question forced her to form a vision of The Chocolate Factory as bigger than her and her co-founder Brian Rogers '95. She moved away from performing to focus on the theater's impact in the community.

"You cannot eat everything at the buffet and enjoy it," said Lewandowski of that decision.

Today, she would—and does—tell policy makers that "Spending a dollar on the arts is like getting ten dollars back. It affects education, development, transportation, community development, identity. It makes society a community, and community a society."

Lewandowski emphasized to the audience of Bennington seniors the need to capture data on the impact of the organization that matters to decision makers, which is often economic. Sheila also reiterated the importance of relationships. She recounted a story about searching for their first performance space and how she managed to get a building manager's phone number. "I got his mother on the phone. For two and a half hours." She secured a lease, at below-market rates.

About the Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award

Established by the parents of a Bennington alumna from the Class of 2000 in honor of Bennington's ninth president, the \$5,000 award has no restrictions on how it may be used. Candidates are nominated by members of the Bennington College community and selected by a committee of faculty and staff.

About Bennington College

Bennington College is a liberal arts college in southwestern Vermont that distinguished itself early as a vanguard institution within American higher education. It was the first to include the visual and performing arts in a liberal arts education, and to integrate work in the classroom with work in the field. To this day, Bennington stands apart in requiring that every student—every winter term—get a job, complete an internship, or pursue an entrepreneurial experience. Bennington students work intensively with faculty to forge individual educational paths around their driving questions and interests. The College graduates small classes of tested students, regardless of chosen field, who are notably confident in their capacity to engage and succeed in the world.