

# Deborah Kaufmann Honored with 2021 Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award

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### Deborah Kaufmann Honored with 2021 Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award

**Bennington, VT:** Performer, healthcare clown, and Healthy Humor co-founder [Deborah Kaufmann '74](#) is the [2021 recipient](#) of Bennington College's [Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award](#).

This annual award recognizes a distinguished Bennington graduate, faculty or staff member, or an individual from the larger Bennington College community whose innovative and inspirational leadership is advancing civic and cultural life and improving the lives of others.

"Deborah Kaufmann has built a lifelong career bringing joy, hope, and humor to hospitalized children and caregivers," said President **Laura Walker**. "By combining a creative spirit with entrepreneurship and empathy, she embodies the type of innovative change Bennington alumni make in the world."

"I originally chose Bennington for Dance; other schools were conservatory programs, too mono-focused, with no way to pursue parallel interests until Junior or Senior year. I wanted a broader education," said **Deborah Kaufmann**. "At Bennington, I was encouraged to mix a study of Pre-Shakespearean playwrights with Dance, to pair ceramics with choreography. This mixing of disciplines was not a distraction. It added dimension; it broadened perspective. It led me in new directions, changing from a Dance Major to Fine Arts (ceramics). These self-directed, yet supported, investigations encouraged a humble pursuit of mastery. When different career paths opened, I had the tools to follow my passions and seek ways to serve others. The discovery of new connections, both human and intellectual, is never-ending."

Throughout her career, Kaufmann's many professional paths have been united by entertainment in the service of healing.

In 1987, she was a founding member of The Big Apple Circus Clown Care Program, which sent clowns into hospitals to perform for hospitalized children and their circle of caregivers.

Kaufmann served as their Associate Creative Director from 2012-2016, training performers in healthcare clowning and working closely with Michael Christensen, the "godfather" of healthcare clowning and Big Apple Circus Co-Founder. During her tenure, Kaufmann was a co-recipient of the Raoul Wallenberg Humanitarian Award as part of The Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit. When the Circus closed, Kaufmann, along with two other Big Apple Circus colleagues, became a co-founder of Healthy Humor to continue the legacy of healthcare clowning, with a vision to expand services across the country and help other nations develop their own hospital clown programs. She has served as Healthy Humor's Director of Training and Education from 2016 to the present.

During all her years in leadership roles at the Big Apple Circus and Healthy Humor, Kaufmann spent a significant amount of time performing in hospitals for children and their caregivers as the much-beloved Dr. Dibble. From 1986 until 2016, when Healthy Humor administrative duties

curtailed her hospital performing, Kaufmann had logged more in-hospital hours than any other healthcare clown worldwide.

She has taught the extensive elements of healthcare clowning—from myriad performing techniques to hospital protocols for infection prevention, safety and privacy, and more—in training, workshops, and seminars across the US. She has also shared her skills and knowledge internationally. Kaufmann has directly trained nearly 200 artists as professional healthcare clowns and given continuing professional development to hundreds more. Many of these students have since created their own healthcare clowning organizations, both in America and abroad.

Kaufmann was also the Artistic Director of The BETES Organization, which uses original performance theater to help people cope with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes. She was the tuba player in the comedy band, The Baltic Street Blowhards. She performed her original clown and puppetry in theaters and festivals around the world. Of her clown show, *Veni Vidi Vici*, [nytheatre.com](http://nytheatre.com) said, “this performance gleams most brightly, with true mischief and solid will operating unfettered at maximum strength.”

Kaufmann will be honored at a presentation during Bennington College’s Fall Weekend, held September 24-26 on the College’s campus.

This is the eight year of the Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award. Past recipients include cardiologist [Jennifer Mieres](#) ’82, Bash the Trash co-founder [John Bertles](#) ’81, human rights and racial justice lawyer [Gay Johnson McDougall](#) ’69, chef and activist [Ben Hall](#) ’04, The Chocolate Factory Theater co-founder [Sheila Lewandowski](#) ’97, Voices Unbroken founder emeritus [Victoria Sammartino](#) ’99, and the late [Holly Block](#) ’80, former executive director of the Bronx Museum.

#### **About the Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award**

The Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award was established in honor of Bennington’s ninth president and former director of the [Center for the Advancement of Public Action](#) (CAPA) to recognize a living member of the Bennington College community.

The selected individual is an engaged citizen who has successfully demonstrated the willingness to step forward and take risks in order to solve problems and achieve results in the areas of education, government, the arts and sciences, or industry.

Established by anonymous parents of a Bennington alum, the annual \$5,000 award has no restrictions on how it may be used. The 2021 honoree will be invited to campus to meet with current students, allowing them to connect with an exceptional leader who is affiliated with the College.

#### **BENNINGTON COLLEGE**

Located in picturesque Southwestern Vermont, Bennington College holds a distinguished place among American colleges and universities. It was the first to include the visual and performing arts in a liberal arts education. It is the only college to require that its students spend a term—every year—at work in the world.

Rooted in an abiding faith in the talent, imagination, and responsibility of the individual, Bennington invites students to pursue and shape their own intellectual inquiries, and in doing so to discover the profound interconnection of things. Learn more at [bennington.edu](http://bennington.edu).

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