

Joan Lipkin, 2007 Ethical Society of St. Louis Humanist of the Year

Today we honor and celebrate Joan Lipkin, chosen as Ethical Humanist of the Year, recipient of our 2007 award. This prestigious award was established more than 30 years ago by James S. McDonnell in honor of Jeff Hornback, then the Leader of the Ethical Society in St. Louis.

Joan Lipkin is the founder and artistic director of [That Uppity Theatre Company](#). Her work as a theater director and playwright creates dynamic and exciting art, often drawing in the people who inspire and spark her creativity, those who may never have dreamed it was possible for them to act or share their lives through theater.

Joan Lipkin is an artist in every sense of the word. She has fire, passion and an unbridled creative drive. Her genius soaks up the world like a sponge, portraying and validating a rainbow of people who often feel as if they live in the shadows. She is a producer, artistic director, playwright, and educator as well as a community activist and a mentor. Many sectors of our population disenfranchised by poverty, racial or cultural minority status, disability, illness, sexual preference or cross-gender identification embrace Joan as someone who capably interprets their experiences and translates them into art.

The unifying thread in Joan's work is Humanism; all of her themes pertain to helping her audiences see, feel, experience and understand individuals who too often are regarded as "other" in our culture. At the same time, Joan's art challenges her audiences, not just to feel compassion, but also to re-examine their assumptions and prejudices.

Joan Lipkin is both artist and activist. She says, "The theatre encompasses virtually everything that interests me: the narrative, the visual, the political, and the capacity to bring people together into a shared space for a live common experience and to potentially affect change." An example of her approach to theatre is Peace Out. Co-produced with poet Deborah Stoddard, she brought together dancers, poets, musicians and actors in one of St. Louis's largest arts collaborations to express their desire for peace by performing for an audience of more than 800 people. She was responsible for St. Louis's first theater production featuring original work by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) youth and members of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). With occupational therapist Fran Cohen, she co-founded the [DisAbility Project](#). Now in its 11th season, they have performed for over 50,000 people and are widely recognized as one of the only projects of its kind in the country.

Joan grew up in a very diverse urban area on the south side of Chicago. She attended public school until entering the University of Chicago High School where she was active in the theater. She came of age during the civil rights and the women's movements and credits her broad exposure to different kinds of people in diverse circumstances as major influences on her work. Her mother, a social worker, was one of the original members of Women Strike for Peace during the Vietnam War era and helped found a free after-school study center for neighborhood children and teens. Her father was the first private practice psychologist in Chicago and offered a free counseling clinic at the Erie Neighborhood House. Both were early members of the NAACP and the Urban League. In addition to her varied family and neighborhood experiences, Joan was able to take advantage of the great Art Institute of Chicago. In 1972, Joan moved to St. Louis to attend Webster University from which she graduated magna cum laude. Subsequently, she obtained a master's degree from Saint Louis University. She has served on committees for numerous organizations, both locally and nationally and is currently on the executive board of the national Women

and Theatre Program.

Joan's plays, including *Small Domestic Acts*, *Some of My Best Friends Are . . .*, *He's Having Her Baby*, *The Date* and *The Girl Who Lost Her Voice*, among others, have been presented in England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, Canada and many cities in the United States. Also a talented lyricist, her plays and songs address a broad range of social and political issues while retaining an intensely personal quality.

She has also received numerous commissions including from Provident Counseling, the ACLU, Susan G. Komen Foundation, Greater St. Louis Federal Executive Board, Fostercare Coalition of Greater St. Louis, Washington University, SSM Healthcare, One Mississippi River and the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, to name a few. As creative and original as she is, her genius is in drawing others into her art, as well as making artists of them. Her recent work with the [DisAbility Project](#), the Missouri School for the Blind and people with Alzheimer's illustrate this phenomenal ability. She is a person who sees possibilities where others see difficulties. For Joan Lipkin, all the world is a stage and anyone can be a star.

Joan Lipkin and her company have received numerous awards including: the Missouri Arts Award (our state's highest honor for profound and lasting contributions to the cultural and artistic landscape of Missouri); Woman of Worth Award; a Visionary Award from Grand Center; Special Recognition from the Recreation Council of Greater St. Louis; Organization Equality Award from the Human Rights Campaign; Outstanding Alumna Award from Webster University; Focus St. Louis What's Right with the Region Award for Improving Racial Justice and Social Equality; John Van Voris Award for Community Service; Arts for Life special Lifetime Achievement in Progress Award, Governor's Council on Disability Inclusion Award and the Frederick H. Laas Award. However, Joan does not consider the Ethical Humanist of the Year Award to be just one more marker recognizing her professional achievements. Joan commented: "I hold this honor most dear since it is given for the ethical underpinnings of my work."

Joan Lipkin's life work is devoted to bringing out the best in others. Her generosity of spirit shines through her work and infuses her art. The Ethical Society of St. Louis is proud to honor Joan Lipkin for her many artistic and collaborative endeavors to help create a more ethically aware community.