

Honorary Degree Dinner
December 13, 2019

At Oakland University, we confer honorary degrees to people whose noteworthy accomplishments have a major impact on their communities, industries, and in making the world a better place.

Over the years, we have acknowledged a diverse range of recipients who individually and collectively reaffirm our commitment to scholarly, creative and humanitarian values.

Tonight, the amazing recipients of Oakland University honorary degrees stand as a testament to the power of education, initiative and vision.

Each in his and her unique way has made a significant contribution to make the world a more humane place, shape our conscience and set a standard for community service and engagement.

Their nominations have been reviewed by the University Senate Honorary Degrees Committee, recommended to the provost and enthusiastically affirmed by the president.

SHEILAH CLAY

- Honorary Doctor of Art Humanities recipient Sheilah Clay is a dedicated and tireless public servant.
- As Director of Training Quality and Retention for the Detroit Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, Sheliah's focuses on eradicating poverty. For many years, she has been actively involved in preparing Detroiters find meaningful work, and helping them along the path to independence and success.
- Sheilah spent 22 years leading the Neighborhood Service Organization, and headed up the NSO Bell Building, a 155-unit housing development for formerly homeless adults.
- As a testament to her vision and impact, a new 42-unit housing and homeless shelter is named in her honor, the Clay Apartments and Center.
- Her passion for justice extends to her service on the Board of Directors of the Michigan League for Public Policy, Opportunity

Resource Fund, The Empowerment Plan, The McGregor Fund, among many others.

- Sheilah is the recipient of numerous awards including the Shining Light Eleanor Josaitis Unsung Hero Award, Community Foundation's Miriam C. Noland Award for Nonprofit Leadership, Campaign to End Homelessness' Carla Javits Award, and the Oakland County NAACP Lifetime Achievement Award.

- Sheilah is a native Detroiter and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Spelman College and a Master of Arts degree from Wayne State University College of Education.

- As part of the McGregor Fund Eugene Miller fellowship, Sheilah taught at Christ Shalom Preparatory Academy and in Ghana, and continues to fund supplies at the school.

- She has presented to the Honors College at Oakland University for three years inspiring the journey of discovery.

- We, at Oakland University, are inspired by Sheliah’s passion, and appreciate her work as a model of social responsibility and engagement that makes a lasting difference.

JOANNE DANTO

- For Honorary Doctor of Arts recipient Joanne Danto, life is an ongoing dance.
- Joanne has performed her artistry on the world stage as a principle dancer with ballet companies, including the renowned Joffrey Ballet, the National Ballet, Pennsylvania Ballet and Frankfurt Ballet.
- Her performances have been heralded by top dance critics for the New York Times and The New Yorker magazine as “brilliant.” “authoritative,” and “superb.”
- In addition to making such an indelible impact as an artist, Joanne is an outstanding role model for young artists, and teachers.

- As trustee of the Marvin I. and Betty J. Danto Family Foundation, she is working to make Michigan a better place for all of us.
- The Danto Family Foundation funds research in cardiovascular diseases, cancer, engineering, medical education along with the performing and visual arts.
- Joanne, your contributions to ensuring that our OUWB medical students can obtain scholarships to assist them to attend our top medical school is exemplary and life changing both for them and their future patients.
- In addition, the foundation is a strong supporter of the Jewish community, the Michigan Opera Theatre and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra – two of the state’s landmark world-class performing arts institutions.
- Joanne’s support for the David DiChiera Music Therapy Program at Henry Ford Hospital, the Interlochen Center for the Arts, and Detroit Institute of Art elevates our awareness of how the arts advance human understanding and provide inspirational expression.

- Joanne, we are inspired by your work as an artist, performer, teacher, philanthropist and community leader.

Thank you for showing us the steps along the path to making a difference.

ROBERT GIBBS

- Honorary Doctor of Art Humanities recipient Robert Gibbs is considered one of the foremost urban retail planners in America.
- He is an urban planner with a global vision that fundamentally changes our lives by designing our environment, and thereby, fundamentally influencing how we experience a public space.
- Robert has been named by his peers as one of the hundred most influential urbanists of the past century, and was inducted into the American Society of Landscape Architects College of Fellows in 2019.
- He has been honored by the Clinton Presidential Library and the City of Auckland for his contributions to urban planning.

- Robert teaches at Harvard University, where his class on urban retail, planning and design is considered THE definitive instruction on the best practices of new urbanism, smart growth and architectural design for successful mixed-use urban commercial centers.
- His perspective and his advice on urban design have influenced developers, planners, investors, retailers, architects and public officials around the world.
- An example of Robert's vision can be seen not far from here. He served on the planning team that rebranded Birmingham, making it one of the most walkable and commercially successful small towns not only in Michigan, but in the United States.
- He has also designed master plans for Detroit, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Grosse Pointe, Lake Orion and Southfield.
- Robert was named a Distinguished Oakland University Alum in 2016. And, I understand Robert and his wife, Elizabeth, who have been married for 40 years, first met at OU.

- Elizabeth is getting her own doctorate from OU's School of Education this spring.
- Robert, we appreciate your vision in creating inspiring public settings that create a more humane sense of community.

J. MICHAEL KOSTERLITZ

- Honorary Doctor of Science recipient Michael Kosterlitz was awarded the 2016 Nobel Prize in physics along with two colleagues (David Thouless and Duncan Haldane) for their theoretical discoveries of topological phase transitions and topological phases of matter.
- He was named a member of the National Academy of Sciences in 2017 and has been a Fellow of the American Physical Society since 1987.
- He is listed as a co-author on more than 9,000 scientific papers.
- In the late 1990s, Dr. Kosterlitz visited Oakland University. He and OU Physics Professor Ken Elder have published four papers together.

- In one manuscript, Dr. Kosterlitz developed a new model to understand eutectic solidification, the process in which a binary alloy solidifies and produces complex patterns made up of stripes of different alloy composition. These patterns often play a strong role in determining the structural, electromagnetic and thermal properties of materials.
- He is a professor of physics at Brown University.
- He received the Maxwell Medal and Prize from the British Institute of Physics in 1981, and the Lars Onsager Prize from the American Physical Society in 2000.
- Great scientific discoveries run in Dr. Kosterlitz's family.
- His father, Hans Kosterlitz, was a world-renowned pioneering biochemist. Hans joined the faculty at the University of Aberdeen in the U.K., where he came after fleeing Nazi persecution in 1934.
- The Kosterlitz Center at the University of Aberdeen is named to honor Hans Kosterlitz.

- Dr. Kosterlitz, we are inspired by your commitment to scientific investigations and for your work that reflects the highest standard of research, which is widely impacting the world of physics, and our world.

SHELDON YELLEN

- Honorary Doctor of Sciences recipient Sheldon Yellen’s business philosophy is the simply the philosophy he lives by. When asked about his business strategies, he replies: “I invest in people.”
- Sheldon is known for his unconventional management style. He watches every penny he spends, but doesn’t hesitate to board a private plane to visit a sick employee or customer.
- As CEO of BELFOR Holdings, Inc. – a \$2.0 billion entity which operates a number of companies including BELFOR Property Restoration, the global leader in damage restoration and recovery services – he has grown his business to include more than 8,400 employees in more than 300 offices in 31 countries.

- His company, BELFOR, has cleaned more than two million sites around the world, including the World Trade Center after the 9/11 bombing, floods in Europe, Hurricane Katrina, the Japan massive earthquake and tsunami, Hurricane Sandy, Hurricane Florence, and the California wildfires, to name but a few.

- By the way, Sheldon handwrites birthday cards for each employee, doesn't carry a smart phone, hates meetings, committees and corporate hierarchy.
 - I know he would like my job!

- He's been featured on the CBS series "Undercover Boss," which earned an Emmy nomination.

- A Detroit native, Sheldon began working as an 11-year-old and dropped out of high school to support his family.

- True to his persistent, never-say-die spirit, he earned his high school diploma at the age of 53. And, at every stage of his life, he demonstrated the curiosity and humility of a lifelong student, learning from peers, mentors, friends and associates.

- So, he's fast-tracking it. Now to his doctorate!
- It's said that Sheldon has a soft spot for the underdog, and that his motto is: "Everyone has a little bit of hero in them."
- Sheldon, thank you for being a hero to many of us, for never giving up on yourself or others, and for understanding that the true standard of success can be measured by the people we touch.

ALYSSA LALKO

- Undergraduate Distinguished Achievement Award recipient Alyssa Lalko is a Presidential Scholar with a 3.99 GPA in mechanical engineering.
- One of her professors describe her as "one of the most outstanding students I have ever taught."
- Another professor observed that Alyssa has the "aptitude and potential...that he rarely sees in students."

- In 2018, Alyssa was admitted to the NSF-funded Research Experience for Undergraduates in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department. Her ideas for enhancing the engine cooling on drones was featured on the 2018 Mid-Michigan Symposium for Undergraduate Research Experiences poster presentation.

- This past summer, Alyssa was accepted as a researcher at the National Renewable Energy Lab in Golden, Colorado.

- She has submitted a research paper to the U.S. Department of Energy, and earned a fellowship from the Michigan Space Grant Consortium for hybrid drone research.

- Chair of the Department of Mechanical Engineering Brian Sangeorzan (san-gee-or-zan) calls Alyssa a “role model for engineering students and a great advocate for OU.”

- Alyssa, we admire your dedication, scholarship and see you as a role model of what OU students can accomplish.